

counting my losses as i let them go by makemelovely

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst, Canon Compliant, College, F/F, F/M, Feelings Realization, Girls Kissing, Growing Up, Lesbian Maxine "Max" Mayfield, M/M, Maxine "Max" Mayfield loves Eleven, Minor Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Minor Will Byers/Mike Wheeler, POV Multiple, Pining, Underage Drinking, Unrequited Love, Will Byers Loves Mike Wheeler, bc that's all this is, haha do u like angst, lucas is wise, max is sad, nancy is the mentor we all need, perceptive nancy wheeler, well mostly, will understand everything

Language: English

Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Nancy Wheeler, Eleven/Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

Max is in love and Eleven is ineffable.

//or four times Max's love for El is easier to spot than the sun

1. Max

Author's Note:

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One

Eleven does not like Max. This is obvious. It's not that Max doesn't try, she really does. She offers El first dibs on her skateboard (something Lucas complains about, the baby) and shares her lunch and offers her jackets when she looks cold and tells her stuff about boys (the wrong choice judging by the way her face turns stony when Max mentions things about Mike). None of it seems to sway her. It kind of pisses Max off. After all, Max is trying. Why can't Eleven?

"Miss Mayfield, are you listening?" Mr. Lee asked, raising an eyebrow.

Max took a breath, releasing it and blowing a strand of red hair off of her forehead. "Yeah, totally." Max lied, tapping her nails on her desk.

"Then what's the answer?" He challenged.

Max took a second to look at the board, and answered. "The slope is four and the y-intercept is three." She answered quickly, and efficiently. Max was weirdly good at math. Like, it was insane how good she was at it. Numbers just worked with her brain.

“Correct, Miss Mayfield. Miss Hopper, could you tell me what y equals?” Mr. Lee glanced at the clock, sighing to himself when it wasn’t nearly close enough for the bell to ring.

Eleven paused, panic bright in her brown eyes. She opened her mouth and closed it abruptly, taking her own glance at the clock. Her face fell and she shifted in her seat, staring blankly at the board. Max took pity on her, scribbling the answer on a piece of notebook paper. *Y equals 11!!!* She scribbled on the paper, underlining it five times. She knocked the notebook off, drawing the attention of Eleven. Max leaned over, flipping it over for a prolonged period of time. She waited until she was certain Eleven had seen it before she picked it up. “Whoops!” Max said cheerfully, picking it up and setting the notebook on the desk before turning to look at Eleven.

“Y equals 11.” Eleven said slowly, carefully speaking each word as if she would mess up if she didn’t think carefully about it beforehand.

“Good job, Miss Hopper.” Mr. Lee praised gently. She had certainly come a long way from failing his class to getting a C+. It had been quite an improvement, one that greatly pleased Mr. Lee.

Eleven blushed, ducking her head. Her fingers danced along the edge of the desk, and Max glanced over in surprise when her pencil began to lift. Max reached over, poking Eleven’s arm to get her attention. Eleven looked over, eyes flashing in annoyance. *What?* She mouthed, dark eyes glaring. Max gestured to the floating pencil, taking care to be as subtle as she possibly could before mimicking wiping her nose. Eleven’s eyes widened and she frantically wiped her nose, glancing around in a panic before slumping against her chair. Her back was straight and stiff, and she didn’t relax all class period.

The bell finally rang, and all Max could think about was the ten problems of homework that she could finish during lunch. She just had to skip her sandwich and eat it in English. Mrs. Rushe liked Max, which was weird for Max. Generally teachers didn't like her because she was loud sometimes and the language that often slipped out was fouler than a sailor's. Mrs. Rushe said she used synonyms often enough that her stories were interesting and weren't repetitive.

Max and Eleven walked back to the corner of the room, and Max wacked Dustin on the back of his curly head. "Get up, nerd, it's lunch time." Max commanded, ignoring the way Eleven rolled her eyes. Max said this every day with little variations mostly because Dustin turned such an interesting shade of red when he was awake enough to hear it.

Eleven used a different approach. "Hey, Dustin, it's time for your favorite time of the school day." She reminded him gently.

"Is there chocolate pudding?" Dustin murmured sleepily, glancing up with tired brown eyes.

Max slammed her hand down on the desk, and the resounding slap echoed in the near empty classroom. Dustin jumped, eyes wide and startled while Eleven flinched away. "Get the hell up or we will leave you." She threatened.

"You wouldn't." Dustin challenged, reaching down and emptying his book-bag. Papers, pencils, and miscellaneous items fell out of it and went everywhere.

Max exchanged looks with Eleven. With a sudden burst of speed, Max grabbed Eleven's wrist and dragged her out of the classroom, sprinting away from the classroom. "You shitheads!" They heard Dustin shout after them as they sprinted down the hall. They wove around corners and people, and Max will never forget this moment. Their footsteps smack against the floor, the sound echoes in the hallway, Max's laughter sounds magical when it's combined with Eleven's, and the burning sensation in Max's veins is adrenaline. She will never forget this.

They slink into the hallway next to the cafeteria, wheezing with laughter. They are short of breath but glowing with excitement. Max flings an arm around Eleven's shoulder. "You aren't too bad, Mayfield." Eleven tells her, eyes shining.

Max pauses, suddenly out of breath. What little she had is now gone. Max swallows, but it isn't easy. It feels like something is lodged in her throat, something she can't quite name. "Yeah, neither are you, Eleven."

"El." Eleven says softly, twining her fingers with Max's.

"Hmm?" Max asks, pushing away red hair away from her forehead.

Eleven smiles, and it is so goddamn beautiful. Maybe it's because Eleven never smiles at her, but Max feels high on it. "Friends call me El." Eleven informs her.

“Okay, El.” Max emphasizes the nickname, and Eleven’s grin turns dopey and soft. Max’s heart swells, and she can’t understand how it shrivels when Eleven kisses Mike on the cheek quickly as they sit down. It’s whatever, though, because El hugs her goodbye at the arcade.

Two

“Do you wanna spend the night tonight?” El asks, her words precise and carefully spoken.

Max choked, chocolate milk dribbling out of her nose. “Christ!” Max exclaimed, reaching over and taking Eleven’s napkin for herself. She wiped her nose, face twisted in disgust. “Shit, El, stop speaking. You’re killing me.”

Eleven frowned, ducking her head sadly. “Sorry, Max.” She mumbled, avoiding eye contact.

Max paused, concern creasing her brow. “Hey, El,” Max reached over and took Eleven’s hand. “I was just joking around. You never have to stop talking around me. Even if it’s dumb stuff about Wheeler.” Eleven didn’t respond, so Max took a breath and took it a step further. “Promise.” She swore, squeezing her eyes shut hard before opening them and meeting El’s brown eyes.

El’s smile split her face. “So you’ll come?” She asked eagerly, her face just like a puppy’s. Her big eyes were bright with excitement and she was doing this weird wriggle-dance in her seat.

Max smiled, genuine and soft. "Of course. I wouldn't miss it for the world." Max squeezed her hand, pulling away with a faint blush on her cheeks when Will and Mike sat down.

"Look what I drew in art today!" Will said excitedly, showing Max a drawing of the gang. In the bottom left-hand corner is Lucas, frowning at Dustin who is beside him and gesturing wildly with a visible gleam of something in his eyes. His smile is so large it practically engulfs his entire face. Next is Will, smiling softly at Mike. Upon closer look Will's body is drawn to face Mike's and his hand dangles closely to Mike's. Will's expression is soft, and the faintest of color appears on Will's cheeks. Mike is facing Eleven, and his hand is entwined with hers. He's leaning closer to Will than El, but his eyes are on Eleven. Eleven is leaning towards Mike in a pretty dress, and her smile looks dopey but sweet. Max is by Eleven but her arms are crossed, and she looks annoyed. But her eyes are on El's face, and the corner of her lips are twisted up. "Do you like it?" Will asked anxiously, peering at her face with worried eyes.

"Yeah." Max's voice is horribly quiet, and she can't stop looking at Will's drawing. More specifically, her and Eleven. Max cleared her throat awkwardly, dragging her eyes up to meet Will's. She doesn't quite like the look in them. Sympathy and perhaps understanding flicker in his warm light brown eyes. Max doesn't know why but it makes her uneasy. "Yeah, Will, it looks beautiful. I especially like the little details." She mentions casually, sliding the paper over to him.

Max doesn't miss the way Will pales dramatically. His already pale skin is now sheet white like a ghost. "U-uh," Will stutters over his words like a doof. "Yeah." He finished lamely, cheeks aflame.

"I mean, look at Dustin's face. His eyes are totally gleaming with excitement. Like, he looks just like real life Dustin. To the tee." Max

complimented.

Will's face relaxed in a rush of relief. "Thanks. I worked pretty hard on his face. I just wanted everybody to look like, y'know, them." He explained, carefully placing the drawing in his bag. He zipped it shut as Dustin and Lucas wandered in.

"I can't believe Sophomore year is almost over." Dustin complained. "I feel like Freshman year was just two days ago."

Eleven and Max shared looks with each other before laughter erupted from their mouths. Eleven giggled relentlessly, her sides shaking and tears forming in her eyes. Max cackled ruthlessly, beating her fist against the table. "Holy shit you were twenty minutes late last year because you emptied your fucking book bag on the ground. Dude, sometimes you are an idiot." Max jeered, punching Dustin in the shoulder.

"Screw off." Dustin grumbled, pulling his lunch out of his bag. He had two sandwiches, an apple, a juice box, and a bag of chips. "Both of you."

"Aw, Dustin, you know we're teasing. We love you, honest." Max reached over and kissed his cheek quickly, ducking with a grin on her face as Dustin blushed redder than a firetruck.

Eleven jumped in, her hands clenched into fists underneath the table but it went unnoticed. "Yeah, we *loooooove* you." Eleven teased, relaxing her fists and taking Mike's hand above the table. Max noticed and glanced away, a bitter feeling burning the back of her

throat.

Max bit into her sandwich, chewing her sandwich for a moment before opening her mouth to ask Eleven a question. “So, El, what time should I come over?” Max asked with her chewed up food visible in her mouth.

“After you swallow your fucking food, Max. Jesus, that’s disgusting.” Lucas jumped in, his voice dripping with disgust and his face twisted with distaste.

Eleven nodded in agreement, laughing when Max pouted. “Around five or so. That should be okay.” El answered Max’s question. “First, you’ve got to get through p.e., English, and culinary arts.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” Max griped, finishing her sandwich and putting her trash with Dustin’s so she didn’t have to throw it away. Lunch flew by, and Max made it through her godawful p.e. class and somehow got through the three chapters of reading she’d missed in English and she managed to only set one small fire in culinary arts. The bell rang and Max bolted out of class, grabbing her bag and swinging it onto her shoulder as she darted down the slowly filling hallway with red hair streaming behind her.

She made it home way earlier than usual. Billy had left for some big fucking city last year and nobody had heard from him since. Max only had one thought: *good fucking riddance*. Max hated Billy with every fiber in her being. It was like Billy lit a fuse in her, and she sparked up in flames. She burned near him, all her hatred bubbling to the surface and overrunning her emotions. With Billy gone, it was like she was constantly submerged in a river. The water soothed away the fire, and Billy’s absence soothed away Max’s anger.

Max ran into the house, quickly scribbling answers to her remaining math problems and finishing the history essay she'd worked on for two hours everyday since it was assigned. Okay, so she was shit at history. It wasn't a big deal. She finished her homework and shoved it into her backpack, not really caring if it got crumpled up. It was four, and Max grabbed a change of clothes and what she'd need the next morning like deodorant and her toothbrush.

Max waited around for twenty minutes before she spotted the familiar police car pull up in the road. It idled for a minute, and Max grabbed her bag and escaped the house. She sucked in a breath of warm air and leaped into the car, sharing a grin with Eleven. "Ready for tonight?" The redhead asked her friend.

Eleven's eyes were shining. "Of course." The girl answered confidently, wrapping an arm around her friend.

The drive to Hopper's cabin went by in a mindless chatter about school, clothes, and Mr. Rogers the biology teacher. "Get out. We're having burgers for dinner." Hopper dismissed them with his usual gruff voice. Eleven leaned over and kissed his cheek, grinning when Hopper ruffled her curls.

"Do you want to paint my nails?" Max offered uncertainly once they had set their stuff down.

Eleven nodded and wandered over to a small section in her room dedicated to nail polish. "What color?" El asked, fingers wandering over each bottle.

“You choose.” Max decided, pretending she was just being generous when really she didn’t know color to pick.

Eleven grinned at her brightly, and picked out a light pink. It looked lovely, but more importantly it looks *girly* . Max swallowed her pride and sat down on the floor. Eleven sat next to her, gently taking Max’s hand and she placed it between them. Eleven’s hand was warm, a contrast to Max’s cold skin. Lucas was always telling her she was a ghost judging by her warmth or rather lack of warmth. Shivers sparked up Max’s spine, and her eyes fluttered shut as she allowed the moment to imprint in her brain. Eleven’s room smelled like vanilla and sunshine. It looked like a mess between a girl’s room and a boy’s room. The walls were painted pink, but the mess of oversized flannels and overalls gave the impression of a boy’s room. The bed was plain but there was a dark green blanket on it and the pillow was just in a plain cover. The carpet was brown but the posters in the room painted the picture of a teenage girl’s bedroom. The deciding factor was the mirror, where pictures of Mike and surprisingly Max were stuck up. There was one picture of the whole gang together and one of her and Hopper but the rest were of Mike and Max.

“When did you take that?” Max asked, using her left hand to point out one of Max laughing. Her face was bright and happy, relaxed and soft in a way she never saw in the mirror. Her eyes were bright, and her face was awash with sunlight. It glinted off her hair and the camera lens. It was beautiful.

“Awhile ago.” Eleven answered absently, her mind focused on the task she was set on doing. Jonathan had gotten Eleven a camera last year, and El was obsessed with the thing. Max supposed it was so she could have something solid to look at sometimes. Years of abuse messed with your mind, and Max got the feeling that El thought she was dreaming sometimes. Like, if she didn’t have something solid to

solidify reality it would slip away and she'd be back in some cell with no other human life than the one who'd imprisoned her. Max never mentioned it because what she had with El sometimes felt delicate, like it would collapse if Max pushed too much. It was hard not to ask questions, but Max figured if she could do it for anyone she'd do it for Eleven.

"I didn't know you took pictures of me. I thought it was for special people only." Max kept talking. She didn't understand her own need to find out this answer. The thought of not knowing why Eleven took pictures of her was terrifying, like it was a life-preserver and Max was drowning.

Eleven glanced up sharply, surprise outlined in her features. "You're my best friend, Max." Max was surprised by the gut-wrenching disappointment but she ignored it. "Of course I take pictures of you." Max nodded slowly, and Eleven felt satisfied with returning to her task.

"How are you and Mike?" Max asked, blinking back the uncomfortableness of the subject. She never liked asking about Mike and El. It caused her stomach to twist up in what felt like pain. She never understood the point of asking questions you knew the answer to either. Max knew the answer would be great or amazing with little variation. A different adjective, perhaps, to describe how happy Mike made Eleven.

"Great, he bought me an ice-cream the other day. Vanilla, my favorite." Eleven shared, her smile going hazy in a way Max only ever saw when Mike was mentioned.

Max swallows the bitterness on her tongue. She had been hoping for

a different answer. Maybe that was the point of asking questions you knew the answer to. "I know." She says low in her throat.

Eleven finished her right hand and moved on to Max's left hand. "How is Lucas? You two are dating now, right?" Eleven asked, tongue sticking out of the corner of El's mouth. It was cute, just like Eleven.

Max shrugs, brushing the sudden wave of burning in her gut away. "Lucas is good. Cute, funny, athletic. The same. He made the baseball team." Max offered the information, hoping the subject would drop soon.

Eleven nodded. "Yeah, he told us at lunch yesterday. I was there." Eleven laughed aloud, and Max blinked away the sudden sadness that slipped into her heart. It began pumping through her system, probably turning her blood blue with the force of it.

"I don't know about the dating part, though. We haven't talked about it." Max fidgeted, blowing strands of red hair out of her eyes.

Eleven frowned at that, and Max was left drowning in the waves of confusion. "Really? You guys have been all flirty lately and you hold hands and you kiss a lot."

"I hold your hand." Max defended, suddenly apprehensive.

"That's different." Eleven said immediately.

Max bit her tongue, desperate for her mouth to stay shut for once. “How?” She asked, hating the way her voice came out whiney.

“We’re girls.” Eleven replied point blank. Max choked back tears, her eyes burning and her pride stinging.

Max swallowed back her horror, and tried to force her voice to stop shaking. “You’re right.” Max conceded, ignoring the regret that glittered brightly on her skin like diamonds. “I just don’t want to label anything. It’s too new.” Max lied, teeth glinting white in the relative darkness of the room.

“I suppose you’re right.” Eleven dragged the suppose out, and it finally flew off her tongue and grew wings. Max watched it fly around the room lazily, flapping its wings lightly before landing on Eleven’s shoulder. Max was enchanted.

Max glanced around the room, panicking when Eleven finished painting her nails and capped the bottle. “Will you braid my hair?” Max blurted out, turning pink when Eleven did a double take.

“I didn’t think you’d want to do something so . . . how would you say it? Oh, yes. *That’s some girly bullshit that I don’t fucking do.* ” Eleven mimicked, forcing her voice to adapt a lower tone.

“Damn, El, that was spot on.” Max giggled, raising her left hand and blowing on her nails.

Eleven flushed proudly. “Really?” She asked.

“Yeah, now do Wheeler.” Max requested, albeit it was more of a demand.

Eleven paused before puckering her lips and began making obnoxious smooching noises. “Mwah, mwah!” Eleven chortled, her shoulders shaking with the force of her laughter.

“Shit, El, you fucking wrecked him and he’s not even here.” Max slapped her knee, eyes bright with tears that formed from laughter.

“Wrecked who?” Hopper inquired, poking his head into the room.

Max wiped her eyes with her right hand because the nails on her left hand hadn’t dried. “Wheeler. Man, you really missed out. Eleven is amazing at impressions.” Max told him gleefully, sweeping a hand through her red hair.

Hop grinned ruefully. “Sorry to miss it. Dinner is ready.” He informed them, swinging the door open.

“Are you hungry, El?” Max asked, helping the shorter girl to her feet.

“Very.” Eleven grinned, leading Max to the table where the burgers were waiting. Dinner passed swiftly in a blur of cheesy jokes that

made Eleven laugh, fighting for more buns, and an easiness that felt of family that Max had only dreamed of. She never knew that this was what a family should look like. Her family dinners were Billy glaring at her from across the living room as his dad watched football on the shitty television screen while Max's mom kept her mouth shut about the bruises littering her upper-arms. Before that when it was just Max and her mom and dad. Then dinner tasted better and the atmosphere didn't press down so hard. It was tense and the silence was suffocating but it was better than wondering if that was the night Billy would snap and murder all of them.

Hopper cleaned the dishes since El had a guest, and Max chatted softly to Eleven. "Bedtime." Hopper declared firmly when he finished with the dishes.

"What? Now?" Max asked, blinking in confusion. She didn't have an official bedtime at home. Mostly it was keep your mouth shut and sleep when you're tired.

"Yes. It's time." Eleven informed Max quietly, speaking into Max's ear.

Max shivered, but she covered it with a frown and an indignant glint in her blue eyes. "This sucks!" She protested.

"So does life. Now shut up and get ready to sleep." Hopper glared, jerking his thumb at Eleven's room.

Eleven got up and touched Max's arm softly. It was gentle, and it did not escape Hopper's vision. "Do not fight." She warned, rubbing

circles with her thumb.

Max bristled before forcing her posture to fall in a position of resignation. “Yeah, okay.” She conceded, following El to her bedroom where she changed into her pajamas and crawled into El’s bed. Eleven turned to face her, dark eyes wide in the darkness. Eleven’s cold shins pressed against Max’s, and her warm feet became tangled in Max’s. It was nice, and it felt familiar. Like coming home, if Max had ever really had a home to go to.

“Goodnight, Max.” Eleven whispered, warm breath puffing across Max’s face.

“Goodnight, El.” Max replied, and the words were swallowed by the pressing silence in the room.

Max fell asleep easily enough, but she woke up in the middle of the night. Eleven had presumably moved to the floor, and Max ignored the sting of pain that simmered underneath her skin. She exited El’s room, treading softly. She fumbled around in the kitchen, opening a cabinet at random and discovering the glasses. She fiddled with the sink and filled the glass with water, taking a sip as Hopper stumbled out of his room. Max shifted self consciously, aware that she probably looked like a mess.

“I’m sorry.” Hopper said, voice tinged with something that Max didn’t understand. Not yet, anyways.

“For what?” Max’s voice was brimming with annoyance and wariness.

Hopper didn't say anything for a long time. "You'll figure it out." He left, and Max went back to El's room. She fell back asleep quickly, but Hopper's words stuck in the back of her mind.

Max woke up to sunlight streaming through the window. It fell on El's sleeping face. She looked absolutely beautiful, her pink lips glowing due to the sunlight. Her face twitched in her sleep, and Max's heart leaped to her throat. Small pinpoints of light glowed on her skin, and it came in all colors. Red, blue, purple, green, etc. All colors of the rainbow. Max swallowed back a gasp as the realization hit her. *Oh*, she thought. *Oh*. Max was in love with Eleven. Max Mayfield was in love with Eleven Hopper, and the reality of what this meant was terrifying. El blinked slowly, a smile spreading across her lovely face when she caught sight of Max. This feeling was ineffable, the moment overwhelming as terror and love raced up every one of her bones. Max was so totally screwed. Screwed because the feelings El gave her were ineffable. No, that's not quite right. Eleven was the ineffable one. Yes, that fits better. Max was in love and Eleven was ineffable.

Three

Max manages to keep a lid on her feelings for a few years. Sophomore year flies by in a blur and Junior year is a mess of confused feelings and Senior year is barely concealed blushing cheeks and fumbling fingers on the college letters. Max gets in at UCLA and El goes to Harvard. Fucking Harvard. Isn't it absolutely wonderful? Max thinks so, and judging by the hickey blossoming on El's neck Mike does too. Freshman year is nice, albeit a little strained. Homework is practically the only constant in Max's life and then it's Sophomore year and Max gets a girlfriend. Her name is Amanda and she's got long brown hair and her pink lips are always smeared with lip-gloss. Max thinks she hangs the stars, but she always conveniently

forgets that Eleven hangs the moon and the sun.

Max stays away from the happy couple until Christmas break rolls around. There's a college party at Troy's, and apparently every college kid is going. Max rolls up to Lucas's house where she's getting ready with Will, Dustin, and Lucas. She stumbled in, fingers dancing against her makeup bag. Inside she packed some lipstick, eyeshadow, and other various beauty supplies that she suspected she'd need. She pulls open the door and is immediately attacked by the largest and fluffiest dog she has ever seen.

"Venkman, down!" Lucas shouts from somewhere out of Max's line of vision.

Max wanders around until she spots the trio of boys gathered in the dining room. They had placed a gigantic mirror on the table and were making silly faces in the mirror. "Venkman, Lucas, really?" She asked, raising an eyebrow.

Lucas's smile in the mirror was brilliant. "What can I say?" He said, shrugging. "I'm really fucking petty." Will giggled quietly into his hand, Dustin was snorting, and Max was snickering. Lucas nodded proudly, surveying his handiwork.

Max kicked off her sneakers and slid her socks off. She shimmied out of her jeans and tugged her shirt off. It went easily over her head and Max combed her fingers through her hair. "What?" Her tone dripped with defensiveness. She was wearing a dark red lacy panty and bra set. She pulled her black dress on, admiring the way the dress clung to the small curves she'd begun developing.

“Nothing, Max. These idiots are being hormonal boys.” Will rolled his eyes, turning Max around to zip up her dress.

Max grinned, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek. Will smiled, and Max rolled her eyes at the whines emitting from the other two boys. “You nerds need to shut up before I knock your fucking blocks off.” Max threatened in a mildly annoyed tone of voice.

Lucas grinned sloppily at Dustin, his eyes bright. “I dated her.” He bragged, puffing his chest up.

“And you got dumped by her.” Dustin pointed out viciously, pulling tube of chap-stick out of his pocket.

“Dustin,” Max cut in sharply, eyes on the seemingly offensive object that he had pulled from his pocket. “Buddy, pal, friend, what the hell is that?”

Dustin frowned, puckering his lips with a playful gleam in his eyes. “What do you mean? It’s chap-stick, do girls not use this or something?” He questioned after applying the chap-stick. “Steve said I should use it to get better kissable lips. Was he wrong?”

“Christ, he was so fucking wrong, dude. Forget chap-stick or else you *will* get your ass handed to you.” Max warned, opening her makeup bag and beginning to get to work. The boys chatted softly to themselves while Max went to work on her makeup. She applied red lipstick, pouting into the mirror when she finished applying it. It turned out pretty decent. It sure as hell wasn’t the best she’d ever done but it wasn’t the worst. Max counted it as a victory. Then she

applied a light eyeshadow, and thick black eyeliner. She didn't look a raccoon so she figured she was safe to party. Max ran a brush through her long red hair, and once it was silky smooth she put it in a high ponytail.

"You look hot." Dustin blurted when Max made her way to the living room.

Lucas commented in a decidedly unique way. "Damn, I wish I was still dating you." He said, his brown eyes wide.

Will took a softer approach. "You look nice, Max." He complimented, giving her a genuine but slight smile.

"Damn straight, bitches. Let's screw some shit up tonight." Max's words were greeted with loud cheers from the three boys.

Lucas drove Dustin, and Max took Will. They arrived two hours after the party started, and it was in full swing when they managed to get inside. Max immediately went to get a cup of something strong, while the boys went to find Mike and Eleven. Max hadn't seen the brunette in a long long time, and she wasn't prepared to see her. Max was afraid the feelings she had pushed away for so long would come rushing back the moment the girl saw the superpowered girl. It wasn't until she was drunk that she saw the girl she was desperately trying to forget.

It was around two hours after they had arrived when Max saw Eleven. The brunette had yanked her into a bedroom, one of many in Troy's lavish house. Max was pushed against the wall, and soft lips

attached themselves to hers. Max's eyes were wide open and frantic. Eleven was kissing her, rather wildly. Eleven's teeth clashed against hers, and her tongue slid into Max's mouth. Max moaned, and Eleven pulled away abruptly. "You look so goddamn hot, Max." Eleven gushed, her breath hot on Max's face.

"God, El, what the hell?" Max whispers in the quiet room.

Eleven laughs, and Max is embarrassed to say the sound sends tingles to her lower body. "You look so gorgeous, Maxie, and I missed you." Eleven's lips are smudged with red. Max decided it's a good look on her.

"Maxie?" Max asked, swallowing a sudden gasp as Eleven begins attacking her neck with kisses. After a particularly hard kiss, Max groans. It's startlingly loud in the noiseless room. Eleven chuckles against Max's throat, and her ribs are totally cracked against the onslaught of her forcefully beating heart.

"It's a nickname, Max. I've thought about you a lot lately, and the nickname just came to me." Eleven smiles, and it looks weird. It tilts on her lips, and her eyes are dazed.

"Are you drunk?" Max asks forcefully, her heart sinking in her chest. It falls to the pit of her feet, and it gets trampled on again.

"No!" Eleven denies. "I want this." She says, her voice clear and strong. It's all Max needs to hear before Eleven is the one pressed against the wall. Eleven giggles, the sound ringing around Max's ears before settling in the hush of the bedroom. Max pressed a series of

quick kisses to El's jaw, smiling smugly when every little kiss would make the brunette draw in a sharp breath. The movement brushed her curly hair against Max's forehead. It tickled, and she giggled against Eleven's pulse. It was jumping rapidly under Max's dry lips, and it was the nicest moment Max had ever had.

"You are so beautiful." Max mumbles against El's warm skin. Her skin is hot, flushed from the oddly warm night and crowd. Max slides a hand against her back, fingers twitching against her spine. Her fingertips are slick with sweat, and the giddy feeling sweeping through her body is because it's *El's* sweat. It's a foreign feeling, one Max has longed for.

"I love you. God, I love you so fucking much." Eleven says loudly. The noise startles the dust, sends shadows spinning away. This is lightness, so much so that Max grows wings. They stretch along her admittedly pale skin and flap, disrupting the stillness of this quiet room. Max flies, and she is so in love. She's never coming down to earth. Except the words that then come out of El's mouth makes her plummet back down. It plucks the feathers from her wings, and Max spirals back to the ground.

"God, M-" Max's vision swims and all she can see is gray. It fills every part of her vision, and she can't fucking see right. Max doesn't know if Eleven says her name or Mike's, and she doesn't want to know. It would either make her fly again or melt her into a small puddle of human goo. Max numbly slides up from El's neck and kisses her lips. She sneaks her tongue in, and they make out for a good couple of minutes. During those minutes, all Max knows is Eleven and how their bodies touch and how he can only hear their heavy breathing. Max pulls away, and she can't help the smile on her face.

Eleven shares a smile for a blissful moment or two before Eleven

pushes Max away, and straightens her dress. She wrestles it from around her waist where Max had pushed it to touch more of Eleven's skin, and while she does Max's heart falls apart. "Thanks. Now I've got my lesbian college experiment out of the way. Thanks, Max." Eleven winks, and presses a kiss square against Max's smeared red lips.

Max follows after ten minutes of disbelief, and the tears flood her face when she spots Eleven and Mike going at it by the staircase. Max manages to find Will and tell him to catch a ride with Lucas before she disappears from the party. She starts her car and drives home, blinking away the burning tears in her eyes. She gets home safely. It's a miracle, honestly.

Max storms into her house, a sob tearing from her throat the moment she enters her bedroom. She slams the door shut, and the sound bounces around in her skull for a minute. She can't believe El would do this. How could her best friend, the girl she loved, be so cruel? It didn't seem possible. The thought of Eleven doing that couldn't connect in Max's brain. Could it be that she didn't know the girl she loved as much as she thought she did? Maybe Max didn't know Eleven at all. Maybe everything was different now. Maybe it was better that way.

Four

Max gets the wedding invitation and her whole world crumbles.

*You are cordially invited to Michael Wheeler and Jane Hopper's wedding.
June 24th, 1993. RSVP.*

The words blur together, and all Max can wonder if it's in Hawkins. It is. She's got to go back. Back to that hell hole, back to that place swarming with memories she's tried so fucking hard to forget. Max RSVPs because of course she does. She calls Will up, and she doesn't even realize she's crying until he points it out. She laughs, sharp and bitter. "You are too, Byers." She retorts, and she laughs again. She laughs because her universe is splitting apart, collapsing into pieces around her. And if that isn't funny then Max doesn't know what is.

"Touche." He replies, sniffing quietly on the other end of the line. "Are you going?" He asks after a beat of silence.

"Of course." She smiles, and it splits her whole face. "You?"

"I'm Mike's best man. I'm kind of expected." Will observes, and Max nods. "We have three months. That's plenty of time to prepare." Will says, and Max falls unexpectedly silent.

"Yeah. Except I don't think all the time in the world would prepare us. I mean, Mike is going to look good in his suit, and you're a sucker for men in suits. And, god, El is going to look so beautiful in her dress. Time runs out quickly, and we don't have all the time in the world. So get ready to watch the man you love marry the woman I love. Not enough time at all." Max hangs up with a click, and a feeling that she was not entirely coherent.

The months slide by in a blur, and suddenly Max is standing in front of a mirror and doing her makeup. She's the maid of honor, and the thought that she should leave has certainly crossed her mind. She doesn't, though, because she wants to see how lovely Eleven looks in her wedding gown. The door opens, and Max can't stifle the gasp that

flies out. “Oh, El.” She’s practically swooning, and the tears that flood her eyes blind her for a minute.

Eleven’s wedding gown is a brilliant shade of white. Her gown goes to the floor, and it puffs out around the waist. Tulle covers the gown from the waist down and the silver jewelry looks absolutely stunning on the brunette. “Do I look okay?” She asks anxiously, wringing her hands nervously.

“Babe, you look more than okay. Damn, El, you look gorgeous. Hot. Beautiful.” Max doesn’t stammer or stutter, but her cheeks heat up with the faintest shade of pink.

“Thank God. I was worried I looked, like, weird or something.” Eleven smiles sweetly, relief etched across her features.

“I don’t think you could ever look bad.” Max says, her voice posed in a joking way. The problem is Max is painfully sincere.

Eleven meets her eyes for a moment, and everything locks into place. She looks beautiful, and Max does too. Max leans forward, and there is a horribly loud knock on the door. Max jolts away as Nancy swans in, brushing her fingers through her brown hair. Joyce followed her, mumbling something to the younger woman. “El!” Nancy brightens, a smile beaming on her face. “Oh, my god, you look absolutely beautiful! And Max, you clean up nicely.” Nancy falters on her comment to Max, but Max just sweeps it out of her mind.

Joyce brushes a tear away, grabbing Eleven by the arms and turning her this way and that way. “Jane, honey, I’m so proud of you. You

somehow got Hop to dress up for this? You, my dear, are a miracle.” Joyce joked, grinning broadly when Eleven laughed.

“Thanks, Joyce! You’re the mother I never had, and I want you to know that I love you.” Eleven said softly, tears brimming in her eyes.

“El,” Nancy warns. “You can’t smudge your makeup.”

Eleven laughs, bright and clear. “Nancy, you’re the sister I never had who I get to have. I am so thankful for everything you’ve done for me. Without you, I don’t think I’d ever have found my love for dresses.”

Nancy giggles gleefully, slender fingers wrapping tightly around El’s. “I love you, El. I believe in you and my brother, and I am so goddamn glad he met you. You make him less of a nerd, and trust me, that’s a good thing.” Nancy whispers, pressing a kiss to Eleven’s cheek.

Eleven turned to look at Max, but the redhead shook her head. “Uh-uh. I am *not* participating in all of your mushy bullshit. I refuse to subject myself to that kind of torture.” Max protested, crossing her arms with a sullen expression on her face.

“After, then.” Eleven says, and Max has never been able to say no to her. Not for long, anyways.

“After. I promise.” Max’s blue eyes are suddenly tearful, and El coos.

“Oh, Maxie.” Eleven breathes, and Max’s breath caught in her throat.

A head popped in, and Max smiled at the sight of Holly. She wasn’t the flower girl, no she was far too old for that. Instead, Chloe was going to be the flower-girl. Chloe Wheeler-Byers was Nancy and Jonathan’s daughter. She had an odd fascination with Steve, who would probably be sitting by Dustin at the bar. Steve had never liked coming back to Hawkins, but he was never one to disregard Dustin’s wishes. Or pleas actually considering she had heard Dustin practically sobbing on the phone to convince the older man to come. “We’re ready.” Holly said happily, long blonde hair sliding against her cheek. Holly pushed it behind her ear with a roll of her eyes, and quickly disappeared into the hallway without shutting the door.

Max froze, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. El was about to get married, and Max would lose her forever. Max tried to quell the rising panic in her chest before it slithered up her throat and suffocated her. Eleven glanced at Max, eyes reflecting the feelings Max is going through. Or maybe it’s just Max’s imagination. “Time to marry your nerd king.” Max tells her, and the reflection disappears. Max is left wondering if the look was real after all. It probably wasn’t.

Max walks with Will, dread heavy in her heart. She glances at him, and she only sees understanding in them. “We can do this.” He tells her, and god she wants to believe him so fucking much. Max smiles, but it’s sad. She doesn’t say anything to him. Max doesn’t think she can.

Max makes her way to the maid of honor spot. Her hands are shaking, she notices idly. She never gets nervous enough to shake.

She smooths her hands over her dress, feeling very far away. It's like a dream, or more accurately, a nightmare. Nancy follows behind her and heads to her spot, while Joyce files in behind her and takes her own position by the brunette. Mike looks dashing in his suit, and Will thinks so too judging by the smile he sends the curly haired man.

The whole place falls silent, and Eleven walks in. Max sucks in a sharp breath, a stinging pain appearing in her side. Eleven looks beautiful in her wedding dress, and when Max imagines hard enough it's El walking down the aisle to her. Max wishes this was a reality, but she smiles anyways. Eleven smiles nervously at Mike, and there are tears in Wheeler's eyes. Nancy is grinning proudly, and Joyce is crying happily.

Max meets Will's eyes, and holds his gaze until the critical moment. *Or forever hold your peace.* A moment of silence. Max opens her mouth, and she shuts it. El wouldn't be happy if Max spoke up. She would hate the redhead for ruining her wedding, and Max could never hurt Eleven. She'd rather die. She'd rather be tortured than see brown eyes swimming in sadness and tears. She would die for Eleven, but she knows somewhere deep in her chest that Eleven doesn't feel the same way. Eleven is Max's ride or die, but Max isn't Eleven's. She knows this. A part of her always has. But there's always been some part of her that liked wishing and fantasies. She just got lost in it. That's how dreams are bad. They give you hope.

The wedding moves on, and the moment is lost. Max wavers from her position, and her brain stutters over a possibility. Max speaks up, El really does love her, and they ride off into the sunset together. It's an idle fantasy, nothing special. It brings tears to Max's eyes though, and when she lets them fall it's easy to disguise them as happy tears. Will knows they aren't.

The wedding moves on, and it's over. Max is giving a speech, her

words dripping with genuinity and love. "I've known Jane for years, and in the beginning she hated me. She thought I was trying to steal her man, and she hated me for it. The day she really began to like me was because I was less of an asshole than usual. I helped her out in math class, and then I ditched Dustin's lame-ass when emptied his entire fucking school bag onto the floor. Dumbass." Max punctuates this with a roll of her eyes, and the guests laugh. Her heart speeds up when she notices Eleven laughing. "We ran down the hallway, choking on our laughter so as not to disrupt the classes in progress. We looked at each other, and we clicked. Suddenly it wasn't Jane and Max it was *JaneandMax* . We were best friends from then on. Inseparable. Well, not as inseparable as her and Wheeler." Max grins messily, joy splitting her apart. She'd do anything to see Eleven laughing and smiling like she is now. It's lovely, and perfect. "And that's why I love these two. They make me laugh, and they're there for me. Always, no matter what. I haven't really seen anyone perfect for each other. Except for these two. I love them both, and they love each other, and that's all that matters. I love you guys, a lot. And I love that you dudes love each other, too." Max has tears sliding down her cheeks.

Eleven looks at her, eyes wide and soft. *I know*. Her eyes seem to say. They are kind, understanding.

Okay. Max's eyes say back. She sits down, and she toasts to Eleven and Mike. Jane Hopper-Wheeler and Mike Wheeler. To the woman she loves and her husband. The champagne is bitter as it slides down her throat.

2. Lucas

Summary for the Chapter:

Lucas learns some new things about his girlfriend.

Notes for the Chapter:

in docs this was titled 'Lucas's girlfriend is gay' just wanted you to know. I wasn't going to update so soon tbh but then inspiration struck and I had to. still unedited also idk if lucas seems ooc to you but if he does kindly let me know thanks hope you enjoy.

One

Lucas looks attractive if he does say so himself. His smile is bright, and the camera flashes brilliantly at him. His smile turns sour when Erica wanders into the room, dressed in an obnoxiously colored sweatshirt. It's a mix between neon pink and neon purple. He frowns at her before striking a pose, ignoring the smirk and teasing glint that appears on Erica's face. She snickers to herself, and Lucas pesters his Mom into finally driving him to the dance.

The car ride is silent, and the dance is underway when they arrive. He nods at his Mom, fumbling out of the car eagerly. He walks quickly into the gym, frowning when he doesn't immediately spot the bright red hair of the girl he was crushing hard on. He saw Mike and Will sitting by themselves with identical dejected looks on their faces, and he saw beside them. "Where is Max?" He asked, and quickly tacked on more names when the boys grew teasing smirks. "And Dustin and El?" Lucas fidgeted in his chair, eyes focused on the door and the door only.

"They aren't here yet." Mike said, rolling his eyes in exasperation

when Lucas shot him a glare.

“Fucking obviously, dipshit.” Lucas snorted, scowling at his friend. “I have eyes.” He continued, waving a hand out and yelping when somebody caught it. “Max!” He breathed, drinking in the sight of the redhead.

Max was standing in front of him, pale hand holding onto his dark one. It was a stark contrast, one Lucas liked very much. He wouldn’t mind seeing more of it. She wasn’t wearing a dress but she looked a million times better than anybody else in the room. Her hair was down like usual but it framed her face nicely. She smiled shyly, cheeks turning a light shade of pink. “You clean up good, Stalker.” Max complimented, and Lucas swears his heart stopped beating right at that moment.

“You do too.” He manages to choke out without stuttering. It feels like a victory, one that turns golden when Max laughs

“Thanks.” Max’s bright blue eyes twinkle. It’s awfully distracting.

Lucas awkwardly shuffles to the beat of the song before giving up. “Maybe I’ll be better at slow dances.” He hints, leaning closer to her. She’s drifting in place, swaying and humming to the song that’s probably outdated. Her perfume smells like vanilla.

“Sure you will, Stalker. You and your two left feet will definitely be better at slow dancing.” Max smiled sarcastically, unaware of the crushed look that flits across Lucas’s face.

“Heh, yeah.” He attempts a laugh, falling into an awkward silence. Dustin appears, his hair poofed up to a hundred. Lucas snorts a laugh, and the song changes. It’s slower, and Lucas takes his shot. “Max, will you dance with me?” He asks nervously, his heart leaping out of his throat. It barrels past his teeth, cracking some as it shoots past. His heart paces on his tongue, preparing to leap.

Max looks at him, surprise outlined prominently in her eyes. “Sure.” She answers after a moment, taking his hand. They fit together perfectly. His hands are clammy, sweat slick on his skin. It’s not his fault that he gets nervous around pretty girls.

Lucas grins, and the uncertainty falls from Max’s eyes. “Tubular.” He jokes, and his heart leaps. It catches onto his sleeve, and Max’s fingers brush up against it. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Max groans, delight flickering across her face. “Ugh, don’t ever say that to me again.” She demands, arms placed awkwardly on his shoulders.

He looks at her, steady and soft. She looks lovely in the dim light of the gym, her face free of any age that she’d acquired months ago. Fear isn’t etched onto her features, and Lucas appreciate it greatly. He never wants Max to be afraid. Never again. The song is slow, and it feels like a movie moment. Like they are soulmates slotting together, clicking in ways neither will ever experience again.

Max jolts forward suddenly, lips crashing against his abruptly before she yanks away. He can’t help his idiotic grin. He knows he looks like a fool, but he looks like a fool in love. Max turns pink, and smiles at

him hesitantly. There's a problem, though. Lucas can tell. There is something *wrong* shining in her face, something that didn't settle across her skin as easy as it had Lucas's. Lucas swallows back the fear, and basks in the small smile she sends him. It feels like the calm before the storm, and maybe that's because it is.

They go to sit down, and they meet Mike and Eleven on the way. Eleven is wearing a blue dress, and her smile turns a little sour when she spots Max. The two haven't exactly gotten along since El's epic return much to the boys collective disappointment.

"El!" Max gasped, her eyes flying wide. "You look lovely." She praised, a grin stretching across her lips.

"Thanks." El said shortly, words sharp and aimed to prick.

Max noticeably faltered, hurt flaring bright in her eyes as she fumbled for words. "I was just stating the obvious." Max eventually decided on, waving halfheartedly as Mike and El left. Lucas didn't know at the time that it was unusual Max would allow Eleven's words or lack of to hurt her. She didn't with anybody else. Lucas didn't know the power El had over Max, and for a while he wouldn't even notice the starry gazes the redhead would shoot the brunette. Nobody did, but it mattered to Lucas because he never thought Max would break his heart. He was wrong.

Two

Max is the coolest girl Lucas knows. That's saying a lot since one of his best friends has literal super powers. If that's not fucking cool

then Lucas has no clue what cool is. And he does. He is on the football team after all. Sure, it's his Junior year and he finally made it after years of trying but it's totally tubular. That's something that he always likes to say to Max. Mostly because her face will turn really red and she'll, like, physically cringe away from him. It's really hilarious when he says it loudly in a public place and people turn to look. He's self conscious sometimes but everybody is. The horrified look in Max's eyes is more than worth it, though.

Mike always rolls his eyes and complains about it when Lucas does this to her. According to him, boys should treat their girlfriends with respect and love and just nicely in general. Of course Mike would say this. Mike is a total pussy. El's got him so whipped his ass is constantly tomato red.

Lucas knows he talks a lot of shit. Sometimes about his own girl. But he supposes it's fine because Max hands him his ass at practically every video game ever. It's kinda hot. No, it's really hot. That's why Max is the coolest girl he knows. She's pretty and funny and smart and she smells nice and she skateboards and she hates girly crap and she loves video games. She's amazing in every way possible, and Lucas thinks that everybody should know it. He's honored that she chose him to date. She could've had everyone, and she chose him.

He told her this once at a party. He'd been drunk off his ass, and Max had that sad look in her eyes like when she drank too many wine coolers and would inevitably have a huge hangover the next morning. "Not everybody, so I had to settle for you." She had quipped, grin messy and not quite right in some places. She had looked old and sad, so Lucas had kissed her. No, that wasn't the whole story. He had kissed her because her hair looked soft in the darkness, and the stars made her blue eyes shine. The back porch was empty, and it was lit with a lightbulb that cast a reddish-pink glow on them. Max had looked incredible. Indescribable. She looked like a dream, one that Lucas had many times.

Lucas had never asked who she couldn't have, and Max had never offered the information. Eventually it shifted to the dark recesses of his mind where it lay in wait for the nights Lucas couldn't sleep.

"Sinclair! Where the hell is your head at, man? We've got a game tonight. We can't afford dreamers." The coach shouted, anger flaring in the middle aged man's eyes.

"Sorry, Johansen. Won't happen again." Lucas called back, swiping a hand across his forehead. Sweat gleamed in the hot afternoon sunlight.

Lucas pushed ahead, breathing easily despite the five laps he'd already done. They always did laps to finish off the practice. Once Lucas had finished his remaining laps, he headed to the locker room. He quickly stripped his uniform off, and stepped into the cold showers. He sighed in relief as the water rushed over him, soothing his heated skin. Some other guys wandered into the locker room, sweaty and exhausted. Most of them had been up last night studying for end of semester finals. Lucas had passed out around seven, exhaustion set into his very bones.

They skirted around him, avoiding him by using the showers at the end of the locker room. Lucas winced, heat pricking at his eyes. He showered rapidly, grabbing a towel and drying off as quickly as possible. He threw on street clothes. His jeans were hanging off his hips and his shirt was striped green and brown and yellow. He shoved his feet in his tennis shoes and grabbed his football uniform. He threw it into a gym bag and left the locker room where he started his car and drove home. He threw his stuff on the floor, and made a face at his little sister. Erica muttered something suspiciously like

nerd, and Lucas grabbed the phone and called Max.

“Hello?” Max asked cautiously on the other end.

“Hey, Max.” Lucas greeted her cheerfully, ignoring the beaded sweat on his skin.

“How’d you get my number, stalker?” Max teased playfully.

Lucas could practically see her, with her smile all crooked and sweet. “Hardee har har.” Lucas gripped, reaching over and dragging a seat to sit in while he talked to the redhead.

“I know, I’m hilarious.” Max praised herself, her voice slightly chalky on the other end of the line.

“Not at all egotistical.” Lucas pointed out, grinning despite his best efforts. It was pointless to stop himself since Max wasn’t there but old habits die hard.

“Of course not.” Max agreed. “So, what’s up?” She asked.

Lucas could picture her twirling the cord around her finger as they talked, and his grin grew larger. “What do you mean?”

"I meant why did you call, you dummy." Max snorted.

"My GPA is higher than yours." Lucas defended, his voice at a higher pitch than before.

"That's 'cause you're a nerd, nerd." Max snickered.

"Whatever." Lucas ended the conversation abruptly, eager to remind her about the football. "The game is tonight. Are you coming to see me play?" He asked, voice holding a hint of insecurity.

"Duh. I told you I would so I am. I invited Eleven and Wheeler and Dustin and Will to come with but Dustin and Will can't and Wheeler is watching Holly so it's just me and El coming." Max informed him, chatting idly.

Lucas frowned, hurt flaring bright and wild in his chest. His friends hadn't actually come to any of the games this season so far. He knew it was boring to them but it wouldn't kill them to support him, would it? Lucas always came to Will's art gallery things even though art was a snoozefest. None of the other guy's did anything like sports or extracurriculars, but if they did Lucas would go to support them. He would do that because he loved his friends. Lucas mumbled a goodbye, and hung up. A sour feeling clogged his throat and made it hard to breathe. It felt like he wasn't appreciated. He knew he was, but it didn't hurt to be given more support.

Lucas glanced at the clock, cursing when he realized his game started in twenty minutes. By the time he got to the field, his coach was already annoyed with him for almost being late. It wasn't until

halfway through the game that he remembered Max and began searching the stand for her. It was a Hawkins game so the crowd was small as shit. He spotted Max fairly easily what with her unusually red hair.

Eleven was leaning close to her, whispering in the other girls ear. Max blushed pink, her smile wide and genuine. Lucas was sitting on the bench nursing his bruised knee. He almost didn't notice the fact that the team had scored, and Lucas clapped a beat too late. El leaped to her feet, cheering wildly. Her brown curls bounced all around, and Max was staring at her. She was staring at El with a look Lucas had never seen before. It was dreamy, and softer than anything Lucas had ever seen from her before. Lucas knew what he would call that look. Lovestruck.

His girlfriend looked at Eleven like she was lovestruck.

Three

College is on the horizon. Junior year had been spent in a blur of watching Max who never seemed to be watching him and a shit ton of homework assignments. Football was the same as usual. That is to say hard as fuck. The best part was that it was almost over. They had one game after Spring Break and then it was over. Lucas had assumed he'd been lounging around all break but Max had different plans.

"I'm sorry - what?" Lucas asked, wide eyed as he spoke into the receiver.

He could practically hear Max rolling her eyes. "You heard me, loser. The whole gang is coming over to help me with spring cleaning and I

expect you there.” She informed him, voice stern.

“Why the hell do I have to be there?” Lucas complained, unable to stop the whine in his voice. He’d been having a perfectly relaxing day on the couch, and he didn’t want to do anything that would exert him physically.

“Because,” Max groaned in frustration, fed up with Lucas’s protests. “You’re my boyfriend.” She grumbled, her voice flinty. She clearly didn’t want to talk about their relationship status.

Lucas couldn’t help his grin, it was joyful and proud. He loved when Max referred to him as her boyfriend. It made him happy and a little weak in the knees. Okay, so a *lot* weak in the knees. “All right, I’ll be over in an hour.” He promised.

“Make it two hours.” Max called out on the other end of the line.

Lucas grinned, shaking his head fondly. “Okay, two hours.” The boy replied, his eyes sparkling with affection.

He hung up, and raced upstairs to get dressed. He threw on some jeans and a t-shirt before heading downstairs and turning on the television. He flipped through the channels before settling on The Twilight Zone. It was a rerun of the episode Eye of the Beholder. Lucas had always liked the episode, finding the twist unique and pleasantly surprising. He watched a few episodes before he started his car and drove over to Max’s.

Mike was already there judging by his shitty car sitting in the driveway. He had probably driven El over too. Dustin's car was parked on the lawn, and Lucas could see Will's bag in the passenger seat. Lucas wandered inside, a little nervous. He kept expecting Billy's racist ass to jump out and beat him up. *Of course*, Lucas thought proudly, *I could totally kick his ass now*. It was true. Football had toughened Lucas up quite a bit.

"For fuck's sake, Dustin. Stop clowning around." Lucas heard his girlfriend shout angrily.

"Yeah, dickhead." He listened as Mike chimed in. "Stop being a dickhead." He could practically see Mike's condescending smirk. Mike was a good guy, but he got a bit pretentious whenever he spouted the word dickhead. Weird, but true.

Lucas strolled in, rolling his eyes in mock exaggeration. "You assholes are fighting already?" He teased, leaning over and pressing a kiss to Max's cheek.

Will glanced up from the box of old books he was sorting through. One pile was presumably for him, one for Max, and one to give away. "When are they ever not fighting?" Will asked dryly, running a hand through his soft brown hair. His kind brown eyes twinkled with humor.

"Fair point." Lucas conceded, winding an arm around his girlfriend's waist. She fidgeted next to him, her smile suddenly shadowed and strained. He didn't notice the glance she snuck at El, as if to check the brunette was watching their interaction. She wasn't, and Max hid her disappointment. Will noticed, and wisely didn't say anything.

Max shrugged out of his grasp, getting up and grabbing a box on the other side of the room as an excuse to her sudden movement. She plopped it down on his lap, dropping to the floor and rifling through a bag of clothes she couldn't fit into anymore. Lucas released a breath, the sound whistling from his lips in a hiss. He dug through it, fingers pausing on old homework pieces and journal entries and coloring books. Lucas looked up at the sudden gasp Dustin released.

"Look!" He said excitedly, reaching over and plucking a yellow jacket from the pile Max had chosen to discard. "Max, I can't believe you would give this away!" He frowned, clutching it protectively to his chest.

Max just looked at him like he was crazy. "Why not? I can't wear it anymore." Max pointed out reasonably, raising an eyebrow expectantly.

"This is what you wore on your first day at Hawkins Middle School. The very same day you met us and decided we were cool." Dustin explained, eyes alight with memories and enthusiasm.

"I'm pretty sure I thought you were all dweebs." Max corrected, sharing a grin with Eleven. She seemed lighter after that, more relaxed. More at home, actually.

Dustin rolled his eyes. "What- ever ." He emphasized, waving a hand around as if to dismiss it physically. "This is an important memory. One that deserves saving."

"If one of you losers can fit into it, you can keep it." Max offered lazily, and Dustin cheered. He forced all of the boys to try it on, and when they couldn't do it he made Eleven do it. El shrugged and took it, unzipping it and smiling sweetly when Mike helped her put it on. She zipped it up, and Max turned bright red. It fit perfectly, seeing as El was practically the same size now as she had been back then. "You look," Max trailed off, her eyes wide in astonishment. "You look beautiful in my clothes, El." Max turned redder than her hair, and El laughed.

"Thanks, Max." The brunette smiled, squeezing the other girl's hand.

Lucas gets a sour feeling in his stomach watching them interact. Max hangs onto the smaller girl's words like they are gospel, like it's the air she needs to breathe. It's like Eleven is sunshine and Max is a plant, hastily drinking in everything Eleven offers her. It's desperate, and rushed, and so obvious that Lucas wants to scream. He catches Will's eyes, and in the pools of brown he spots sympathy. He wants to cry, and he wants to rage because he *loves* this girl. Loves her with something hard and fierce in him. She is loud, and fierce, and larger than life. She fought for a place in his heart and then got bigger and bigger and now his heart is squished against his ribs. She fills up his whole chest, sits there and laughs and dreams and shines. She glows, and he thinks the light reaches out from beneath his skin, wrestles out of bones and flashes brightly against his shirt. He loves her so he lets her go.

They break up three days later. He brings Katie to their table a week and four days after that. He calls her his girlfriend and selfishly hopes the look on her face is jealousy. It's not. He suspects it's relief, and that hurts a hell of a lot more than he wants it to.

Four

Lucas glanced over, reaching out and nudging Mike's shoulder. "Hey," he whispered, trying to be as quiet as possible. They were in english class, and they were supposed to be filling out a study guide. It was Friday, and on Monday they had finals. "Do you want to get the Party together and study for Finals tonight?" He asked, glancing quickly at the teacher to confirm she was not paying attention.

"I'll have to check with Mom but it should be fine. Would it be an all night kind of thing or what?" Mike answered carefully, dark eyes flicking up to assess the teacher's level of attention before filling in an answer on the study guide.

"All night, man, what the fuck do you think this is?" Lucas said teasingly, ignoring the sharp glare from the girl in front of them.

Mike rolled his eyes, lips twitching despite his efforts. "I must've forgotten." He murmured dryly, raising an eyebrow at the girl who huffed and turned around. Over the years, the Party had gotten sharper with their peers. They were less likely to be intimidated now. Preventing an apocalypse tends to do that to you. "I'll ask my Mom when I get home and call you. You'll tell El and Will while I tell Dustin and Max, right?" He inquired.

"Duh. We always do it that way." Lucas rolled his eyes, idly scribbling an incomprehensible answer on his paper.

Mike glanced away as he mutter "Not always."

Lucas stiffened, and debated about saying something but he decided to let it drop. Mike and Lucas were best friends, but even friends fight. It wasn't exactly uncommon when they fought, though, and everybody was well aware when they did. "What time should we show up?" Lucas asked, changing the subject.

"Around 6:00 or 6:30. That should work well." Mike decided, flipping the page in his study guide. His lips curved into a small grin when he saw that he had finished the study guide. He internally debated giving the answers to Lucas, but ultimately decided not to. That would just aggravate the other boy.

Lucas nodded, and went back to focusing solely on the study guide. Lucas was weirdly good at school. He could scrape by with a B+ in every subject and that was when he slept in class. He was getting all A's which wasn't much of a challenge if he was being honest. It aggravated Max who was barely scraping by in History, and Eleven who was never quite as secure in her knowledge. He tried to avoid mentioning it because he never liked making his friends insecure. It made him feel like shit.

When Lucas got home, he checked with his Mom to see if it was cool. She said it was okay with her if it was okay with Mrs. Wheeler. "Lucas! Phone." She called out to him later around four.

Lucas pounded down the stairs, shoving past Erica on the way. He grabbed the phone and answered with an enthusiastic "Mike?"

"Yeah, Lucas. It's me. My Mom said it's okay and that if everybody gets an okay then you can all stay the night. You'll tell El and Will?"

Mike said, his words rushing together. After years of talking to him, Lucas was able to understand him.

“Yep. I’ll call them as soon as you hang up.” Lucas confirmed, dialing the Byers when he heard the familiar click on the other end of the line. “Hey, Mrs. Byers-Hopper. Is Will and El home?”

“Yes, Lucas. Why are you asking? Did Will leave some of his paint at your house again? I told him to be more careful. I swear, that boy always has his head in the clouds.” She told him, voice soft and fond. “And didn’t I tell you to call me Joyce?” She said, her voice jokingly stern.

“No, he didn’t leave anything at my house, Joyce.” He stressed her name, smiling when he heard her laugh on the other end. “I was wondering if El and Will could spend the night at Mike’s house tonight? The whole Party is staying over to study for Finals. There was a study done that studying with a group could actually help you retain-” He began to say before Joyce cut him off.

“Has Karen approved of this?” Joyce asked, her main concern being about the other woman’s response to the question. She wasn’t worried about Lucas lying. She trusted the boy, and she knew how stressed El got about Finals.

Lucas nodded before mentally smacking himself once he remembered Joyce couldn’t see him. “Yeah, Mrs. Wheeler said it was fine. Oh, could you tell them that we’re meeting over there around 6:30?” He asked before she could hang up the phone.

"I haven't said yes yet." The older woman laughed warmly. "Of course they can, and I'll let them know about the time."

"Thanks, Joyce." Lucas grinned.

"No problem, Lucas. Have a nice night." Joyce told him before hanging up. Lucas followed suit, hanging the phone up against the wall and going upstairs to pack an overnight bag.

When 6:30 rolled around, Lucas grabbed his bag and headed to his car. "Bye, Mom! Bye, Dad!" He shouted before stepping outside. He shivered for a moment in the cold air before he got into his car. He started it, and was soon at Mike's house. He pulled in right after Max.

She got out of her car, red hair falling down her back in the dim porch lighting. Lucas swallowed roughly, and tried to ignore the horrible crushing feeling in his chest. It was hard to ignore because it made him feel short of breath. Lucas didn't regret breaking up with Max last year because it was what was best for both of them. He didn't want to be stuck loving a girl who wanted someone else, and it just wasn't fair to either of them to stay in that relationship. He also couldn't regret it simply because of that look of relief on her face. It still stung, and he couldn't help but remember it every time he saw her. It would flash in his mind for a split second, and it always left him hurt.

Lucas took a deep breath, and got out of his car. "Hey, Max." He greeted cheerfully, ignoring the ache he felt at the sight of her. So what if he still loved Max. He'd get over it eventually. Key word in that sentence is eventually.

Max grinned at him, swinging her backpack higher onto her shoulder. “Hey, Stalker. Coincidence that we arrived at the same time? I think not.” She teased, adjusting her hair so it wasn’t trapped underneath the strap of her bag.

“Oh, shut it.” He grumbled good-naturedly.

“I most certainly will *not* !” Max declared dramatically, her hand flying to her chest.

Lucas ignored her theatrics, knocking on the Wheeler’s door. “Hey, Mrs. Wheeler.” He greeted the woman, pleased when she opened the door and gestured them in. They made small talk for a few moments before the two teenagers trooped down to the basement where the rest of the Party was waiting. “Hey guys. Ready to study our asses off?” He joked, dropping onto the couch.

“No.” Eleven said. She was curled into Mike’s side, and Lucas didn’t miss the pained glance Max shot them.

“Why not?” Dustin asked, pulling out a 3 Musketeers Bar. “The whole Party is here and we’re gonna do great on our finals.” He said positively, grinning at them happily.

“Maybe you are Mr. Always On the Curiosity Voyage.” Max sassed, flopping onto a cushion beside Will. She reached over and plucked a few flashcards from him and began quizzing him. The casual movements that lacked hesitation really spoke volumes about the closeness of their relationship. It was intimate but not in a sexual or romantic way. Lucas would be lying if he said he wasn’t jealous.

Lucas began studying his English study guide, reading through it four times before moving on to some of his History notes. It was around three in the morning when Dustin fell asleep, curled up underneath a blanket and snoring softly. Mike was next, laying sprawled on the floor and murmuring something unintelligible. Lucas gave up trying to remain awake and curled up on the couch. He was asleep in minutes.

In the morning, Lucas was the first to wake up. He blinked slowly, yawning and stretching after a minute. He glanced around and noticed that Max was curled tightly around Eleven. They were facing each other, their legs entwined and arms thrown around the others waist. Max's eyes fluttered, and her eyes widened when she noticed their position. Her cheeks turned pink, and her lips curved into a lovely smile. Her eyes glistened with something soft, and tender.

Lucas's heart ached for her and simultaneously broke for her. He wanted her to look at him like that, but he knew she never would. His heart broke for her because he sometimes saw that look in El's eyes. He saw it in El's eyes whenever she looked at Mike. This wouldn't end well for her, and Lucas hated that it would end at some point. It must've caused her so much pain. Pain Lucas had never imagined. Pain he didn't want to imagine. No, this wouldn't end well at all.

3. Will

Summary for the Chapter:

Four times Will manages to notice something besides Mike.

Notes for the Chapter:

literally on docs this was titled sad bean will byers so prepare yourself. this has a little bit more group fluff than the other chapters but it's also still horribly angsty so like be prepared.

One

It's snowing. Or, it snowed. A few flurries fall down on them, and Will Byers thinks Mike Wheeler looks especially cute with snowflakes in his hair. Will swallows, and tries to pretend that maybe it's Max who looks cute with snowflakes in her hair. It's not that she's not pretty, it's more like Will doesn't think she's as pretty as Mike. He's not attracted to her, not in any way that makes sense for a teenage boy.

"Who's ready for sledding?" Dustin asks, a goofy grin on his face. His dark brown eyes gleam with excitement, and he looks overjoyed to be there.

"I am!" Lucas shouted, struggling with his coat and hat. He was trying to put them both on at the same time and he was obviously failing.

Max stepped in to help, rolling her eyes and huffing with annoyance.

“Fucking hell, Stalker, do you need a hand?” She muttered sarcastically, untangling him from his coat and holding it away from him as he put his hat on. “There, Princess, nice and cozy?” She teased as she helped him into his coat.

“Fuck off.” He muttered, glancing away in embarrassment.

Will turned to El, and tossed his arm around her shoulders. Their parents had recently started dating, and they’d begun jokingly calling each other brother and sister. It never failed to make either of them smile. “Are you ready, sis?” He asked, watching her carefully.

Her brown eyes were bright with wonder as she took in all the snow. It looked magical, and friendlier than when she had been lost in the woods. “Warm.” She murmured carefully, fidgeting with the sleeve of her coat. She shook her head, frowning when her hat fell off and snow flurries made their way to her curly brown hair. She looked like an angel. “Cold.” She pouted when she put her hat back on.

“Yeah.” Will laughed, bumping his hip against hers. “Cold.” He agreed, reaching down and carefully packing the snow into a ball. He flung it, and snickered gleefully when Mike whipped around with a glare.

“Sick, Byers!” Max called cheerfully, laughing as she began making her own snowballs.

“Hell yeah!” Dustin shouted. “Snowball fight!” He declared, creating his own weapon and flinging it at Lucas.

It missed by probably a mile. Lucas raised an eyebrow, before saying something. "Good shot, buddy." He said, his tone clearly saying *fuck you* .

"Shit." Dustin muttered, waddling off to a set of trees to hide behind. He was stuffed in what looked like two coats, three pairs of pants, boots, two scarves, earmuffs, and a hat.

"Are we doing teams?" Mike asked anxiously, clearly observing El. Will felt a stinging pain in his chest, and he forced himself to ignore it.

"Duh." Max rolled her eyes before quickly making a claim. "Dibs on El!" She shrieked, darting forward and catching El's wrist. She yanked the shorter girl after her, fumbling through the snow.

Mike pouted, his eyes trailing after them. "No fair." He called after them. Max just flipped him off. Mike turned to Will, sighing in disappointment. "Looks like we're teammates."

"Don't sound so thrilled. Anybody listening would have thought you'd die of ecstasy by being my teammate." Will grumbled, hurt in his voice. He had figured Mike would've been happy they were on the same team. Sure, he wasn't El but he was *Will* . Mike's best friend.

"Oh, Will, I didn't mean it like that." Mike quickly said, panic in his voice. His eyes were wide, and regret flashed brightly in his eyes.

Will turned his sad brown eyes to him. "It sounded like you did." He murmured, his chin wobbling. He figured Mike would never hurt him. Not on purpose.

"Will, I'm sorry. I swear I was just hoping I would be the one to teach El how to make snowballs. She's never done it before, but Max is going to I guess. El and I haven't had much alone time to be, y'know, *together* as a couple ever since she got back. I just miss spending time with her one on one." Mike rambled, his words rushed. Will just nodded. He never believed he really had a chance with Mike but it still stung when Mike so clearly preferred El to Will.

Will thinks over his reasoning, and forces himself to let go of the bitterness clogging his throat. "Yeah, Mike, I get it. I'm the friend, but El is the *girlfriend*. That doesn't give you the right to treat me like shit, Mike. Maybe you should've called dibs on El faster." Something vindictive clings to his heart, squeezing and squeezing. It hurts, and Will swears he sees spots.

Mike stops him, gloved fingers curling around Will's bony wrist. "I know, Will, I fucking *know*. You have to believe that I'm sorry because I am. I know I was being an asshole, and I apologize for my less than stellar behavior. I shouldn't make excuses." Mike hangs his head, long black hair flopping in his eyes.

Will laughs, partly in amazement and partly because he can't *stand* seeing Mike so sad. "It's fine, Mike. I'm not mad." Will reaches out, and before he can stop himself he smooths Mike's hair back from his eyes. It's almost worth the hot rush of embarrassment that flits aggressively in his body to see the shade of red Mike turns.

“Promise?” Mike asks, brown eyes sad and pleading.

Will swallows thickly, a sudden prick of tears in his eyes. “Promise.” He mumbles, and promptly gets walloped by an army of snowballs.

“Shit!” Mike exclaims, eyes widening in panic. “You fuckers!” He shouts at them, but his words simply echo in the snowy clearing. “C’mon, Will, we’ve got to take cover.” Mike grabs his hand and ushers him to a bush. “Hide behind the bush and I’ll hide behind the tree. Make snowball after snowball, do you copy?” Mike always reverts to the most basic form of speaking he knows: radio commands. He does it when he’s in a rush or taking charge. Will kind of loves it.

“Copy.” Will nodded, beginning to sculpt the most decent snowball he can make in a hurry.

Lucas and Dustin win, surprisingly. They found Max and El hiding in a ditch, teeth chattering and shivering even as they curled close together to preserve body heat. Max’s cheeks look permanently stained red, and Will feels a rush of sympathy crashing over him. “She looks lovely with snow in her hair, doesn’t she?” He says carefully, each word falling from his lips are perfectly crafted and considered delicately. He can’t mince the message, but he can’t be too direct. That’ll make her flee, and he wants to talk to somebody about *this* . This being the inane attraction he has for Mike Wheeler that he’ll never be rid of. It curls on his back, like the clothes he wears everyday, and it’s a weight that is no longer crippling.

“So does he.” Max says after awhile, side-eyeing him uncertainly.

“It’s a shame how lovely they look together.” Will murmurs, glancing over his shoulder the cutest couple ever (Dustin’s words, not his) stand, talking softly to each other with heart eyes. Mike has *never* looked at him like that, Will thinks, and he likely never will.

“Yeah.” Max’s voice cracks, and Will’s heart breaks for her. “It’s a damn shame.” Max blinks away the tears forming, and Will touches her arm. She pulls away but after a minute of the comfort.

The silence stretches between them until they are joined by the rest of the Party. “Ready to sled?” Dustin asks cheerfully, oblivious to the inner turmoil engulfing two members of the Party.

“Yep.” Lucas nods, and races ahead. “Last one there is the biggest loser on the planet!” He shouts over his shoulder, and Max curses.

“You little shit!” She screeches as she sprints after him. Will follows behind, sliding through the snow and panting. His cheeks are pink, and he is heaving after the exertion. Mike follows behind him, and El follows behind with furrowed brows. Dustin arrives last, panting and swearing.

Will pauses on the hill, and his fingers itch for his pencils. It’s beautiful, and he aches to sketch it. Will likes to sketch beautiful things. You’d know if you flipped through his drawings. There are lots of Mike, who is Will’s favorite muse. “Wanna ride with me?” He hears a voice ask, and he turns to respond. Mike grins at him, messy and kind and a little embarrassed. Will’s heart flips over, and the butterflies in his stomach have multiplied.

“Yes.” Will hopes his voice isn’t as breathless as it sounds.

Mike’s smile expands, spreading across his face. It’s wide and beaming and brilliant. Will is a little starstruck. He almost shields his eyes because Mike’s smile is so blinding. “Awesome! Let’s go.” Will follows, heart hammering against his ribs. Mike allows him to ride in front, and Will almost dies when Mike wraps his arms around Will’s waist.

They fly down the hill, and all Will can think of is the warmth of Mike’s arms and the sound of his breath as it puffs against his ear. Heat courses through his veins, and he is flying higher than any sled ever could. He leans back against Mike, almost sighing when he feels Mike’s smile against the side of his neck. Mike’s thick hair brushes against Will’s cheek, and his pulse skyrockets. This is *everything* to Will, and he thinks how perfect this is. He wishes he could draw this feeling so it would last forever. He needs to capture it somehow, trap it so he can revisit it whenever he wants. He settles for dreaming of it, and he settles for being in the now. God, he is so thankful that he’s in the now because his daydreams could never quite capture the feeling of being in Mike’s arms. They slide to a stop, and Will turns and hugs Mike. He grips him hard, and fights the urge to whisper in his ear. *I love you*, he wants to say. *I want you to love me too but I will settle for this almost. This almost is enough, because you are enough. Always. It’s you, always.*

They sled for hours until they are numb and cold. They all sled with everyone, and Will has never smiled more than today. His cheeks hurt, and the hole in his chest is healing. Mike decides to have the last sled with El, and Will and Max decline to go again so Dustin goes with Lucas. It’s just them.

“Do you like him?” She asks. He would see her hands shaking if she

hadn't jammed them in her pockets.

"Do you like her?" He counters. Neither of them can find the strength to answer, and that is only answer they need.

Two

Will has never been good at the whole dancing thing. He's terrible. Like, really horrible. It's actually kind of comical how bad he is at dancing. And it's not like people haven't tried to help him. His Mom has, Jonathan, Hopper (per his Mom's request), Nancy (per Jonathan's request), El, Max, Lucas, and Dustin. It's even a running joke between the party.

El will just start laughing at any scene that involves dancing in any movie and then point at Will as if to say ' *You can't do that! Haha*' . Max will randomly do ballet moves because her mom forced her to do ballet class when they lived in California. She'll make Will do them too and the only difference between them is that Max's moves are graceful and Will's are clumsy. Dustin will make lame dance puns to him, and Lucas does (admittedly) hilarious imitations. The only member of the party who doesn't tease him about his shitty ability to dance is Mike. It makes Will like him more if that was even possible.

Will is actually grateful that Mike is the only member of the party to never attempt to give Will dance lessons. He'd probably burst into flames, and die of spontaneous combustion. He's glad Mike will probably never give him dance lessons. It seems the universe is giving him a break.

Actually, the universe is the *worst fucking bastard* in existence and should cease to exist *immediately* . He gets the worst news of his life on a Thursday at lunch.

“So, the dance is on Saturday,” Max begins as she sits down. She’s late to lunch, as usual. She has gym fourth hour so she has to change out and then come to lunch.

“Yeah, and?” Will asks, cautiously taking a sip of his milk. His stomach twists with dread when he realizes Max is waiting for him to set his milk down and swallow. He sets his down, eyes wary.

“Well,” Max continues, frowning when Will grabs his milk again and takes an even smaller sip. She waits, becoming more impatient when Will takes even smaller sips. She wasn’t sure how long he’d make it last, but it’d probably be twenty more years until he finished his milk. Max reached over and snatched it away, rolling her eyes as Will began his protests. “I’ve assigned Mike to try to teach you how to dance.” She announces proudly, beaming as she leans back.

“What the hell? Max, why would you even do that?” Will pales, his hands beginning to shake. This is the worst news Will has ever recieved. What if Mike realizes Will is in love with him? What if he calls him a freak? What ifs run rampant in his head, and Will thinks maybe he’s going to cry.

“Will, if you really don’t want to, then we don’t have to do it.” Mike offers uncertainly, looking a little hurt by Will’s vehement protests.

“No, Mike, it’s fine. I swear.” Will says instantly, reacting at once to

try and reassure Mike. "I was just startled, and a little annoyed. I can't dance, and I'm a little bored of trying. It bums me out whenever I get my hopes up and then I still suck." Will mumbled, ducking his head as red creeps up his neck.

"It'll be casual, Will, I promise. No expectations, just fun." Mike explains, absently running his thumb over El's hand. It's the casualness of the intimate gesture that makes Will ache.

"When are we doing this?" Will asks, his stomach a jumble of anticipation and dread.

Mike smiles, and Will dies a little. He is so pretty it hurts. "Friday. I think I'm gonna try and make it a sleepover."

"I'll ask my Mom." Will says, and his fingers dig into his jeans.

Mike gets permission to stay the night, and Will's Mom says yes. Of course she does. That Friday night, Mike comes over. They play games and they talk. Finally, Mike suggests they stop stalling and dance. Will turns on some music, and the moment his hands touch Mike's, everything fades.

Will sways in place, letting himself take the place that the girl would usually. They dance far apart, hands clammy. Will's heart is racing, and his breathing is stuttering. Mike pulls him closer, a grin tilting on his pink lips. "I'm not going to bite." Mike jokes, and Will laughs, low and breathless. Will falls into him, elbows bumping against his sides and nose colliding with Mike's jaw. Will tucks his head in the crook between Mike's shoulder and neck. His skin is so soft, and Will

nuzzles closer. He can feel Mike's pulse, *bump bu-bump bump* and Will smiles against his skin. Will is so hopelessly in love, and Mike is the sun. Will's lips brush against Mike's skin, and it is *brilliant*. Will tilts his head up to observe Mike's profile, eyes dancing over his freckles and cheekbones and eyelashes. His freckles are like stars, everywhere and plentiful. Will wants to go stargazing every night. His cheekbones are high, like a model's, and Will thinks that Mike is the best male model he'd ever see. His eyelashes are dark, and long. They look coal in the lighting of Will's room.

Speaking of Will's room, he's a little embarrassed about the way his eyes keep straying to the bed. Wouldn't it be wonderful if they just crashed together and become a combusting star. Brighter than the sun, and glowing hotter than a volcano. He tries to ignore, and becomes successful when he focuses on Mike. His eyes are closed, and a small smile turns the corners of his mouth upwards.

And then Mike speaks. "Your turn to lead." He whispers, and the moment is broken.

"Okay." Will breathes, and switches positions with Mike. He leads, swaying gently. Mike falls into him, similarly to how Will did. His knees bump against Will's, causing Will to giggle. Mike's head rests comfortably on Will's shoulder, breath puffing against his neck. Shivers erupt down his spine, and Mike moves closer. He noses around, and his nose brushes a spot behind Will's ear. Will physically shudder, a gasp choking from his mouth. He can feel the grin on Mike's lips, and his hands tighten their grip on Mike's hips. He can *feel* the gasp that falls from Mike's oh so pink lips that are oh so tempting.

They pull apart, and Mike grins. "I think you've got it." And Will nods. He wants to kiss Mike so badly it hurts.

The next night, Will slow dances with Jennifer Hayes. "I can't believe Wheeler taught him how to dance." He hears Max say in awe.

"Of course. If anybody could, it'd be Mike." El answers. Will has a brief moment of panic. Could she know? He risks a glance over, just to check. What he spots is this: Max, her eyes wide and shining with disbelief and something Will can't quite pinpoint. She's looking at El, and only El. She looks like she *wants* with something fierce, wants with something Will can understand. He looks away to give her privacy because that look is all intimacy. Will isn't sure he's seen anything like it. He wonders if Max loves El like Will loves Mike.

He pushes that thought away because Jennifer's breath fans against his neck. It's a prime opportunity to imagine it's Mike.

Three

Will gets an acceptance letter to NYU, and the Party goes to Benny's. It had been shut down for awhile due to the unfortunate death of the owner Benny. A guy named Jared had bought the place and fixed it up. In memory of the previous owner, he allowed the name to remain the same.

They go on Wednesday, twenty minutes after school. They had to let their parents know where they were or else they'd blow a gasket. Well, Will thinks to himself, not Mike's parents. Ted was as absent as ever, and lately Karen wasn't paying any attention to Mike. He had come over multiple times, eyes red and puffy because of their incessant bickering and horrible nagging. It didn't used to be like this. Once upon a time, they dinner together as a family. A happy

one. Mike would talk about the science fair, Nancy would gush about that A on her history test, Karen would speak glowingly about the baby, and Ted would go on and on about the latest movie. It had been fun, and loving. Something Will had envied for the longest time.

Now their roles are flipped. Will has the loving parents and the happy family while Mike has the hateful parents and dysfunctional family. Maybe that's why Mike comes to him so often. It's because Will gets it.

"You okay, Will?" El asks, her eyes focused on the road.

"Why?" He asks carefully, fingers drumming on the dashboard. El's car is . . . something to say the least. There's a whole bunch of things scattered around. Old cups, spoons, a Star Wars shirt, a tube of lipstick, a hoodie Will's recognizes as Mike's, and even a Rubix Cube. It's crazy how many random items you could find in El's car. On the dashboard is a framed picture of the Party at Dustin's fourteenth birthday party. Dustin is grinning messily, but brightly. Will can spot the smudge of cake in his left eyebrow that Lucas had quickly smeared on before the picture. Dustin had been frowning until El (serious, sad El) had gotten some and put it in both of her eyebrows. Lucas was smiling too, but it was dimmer than Dustin's. Like he'd realized something bad just as the picture was being taken. Mike was blushing, presumably because El had taken his hand. He had gushed to Will afterwards (*She held my hand!* He had exclaimed loudly over their private walkie talkie channel. *Visibly! Like, in front of everyone!*) Max had been glaring until El leaned over and whispered something in her ear. Then the redhead had blushed, a dopey smile playing on her lips. To this day, none of the other Party members knew what El said. Not even Mike. El refused to tell him, and Max threatened to punch anybody who asked. Will's smile was considerably smaller than anybody else's, and that was for a reason. It was because at the moment in time he was still having horrible nightmares about the Upside Down.

Will shook himself out of the memory, and forced himself to pay attention to his sister. "You just seem lost in thought. I was worried." She spoke carefully, hands gripping the wheel tightly. She pulled into Benny's parking lot, something dark hiding in the shadows of her eyes. Benny's always brought back bad memories for her. Will reached a hand out, gently placing it on her bicep. "I'm fine." She shook him off, unbuckling her seatbelt. "Really." She insisted at Will's unconvinced look.

Will got out of the car, grinning when he got inside and saw their friends waiting. They had ordered for the whole table. El walked past him, sliding into a seat beside Mike. Will slid into an open spot beside Max, who congratulated him with a smack on the back. "Congrats, Byers. Got into some far away college. Lucky bastard." Max teased, her voice only half joking. Her eyes kept straying back to Mike and El's entwined hands.

Will couldn't really talk, though, because he kept doing it too. "Yeah, I guess." He murmured, taking a sip of his vanilla milkshake.

"Dude, you guess?" Dustin spoke up, his mouth full of fries. "Fuck, man, I'd kill to get out of Hawkins." He complained, his voice dripping with mild envy. Will knew he didn't mean it as much as he wanted to. After all, Steve was in Hawkins and Dustin never wanted to ditch his mentor.

"I guess I am lucky." Will smiled, and changed the topic. "How was the geometry test?" He asks El. In Freshman Year she had taken Pre-Algebra and in Sophomore Year she had taken Algebra. Then she took Algebra II instead of geometry so now she was taking geometry.

“Fine.” El mumbled, taking slow bites of her waffle.

“Did you hear about that one asshole kid Jake?” Dustin asks eagerly, leaning forward with an excited gleam in his dark eyes.

“No!” Max gasps, whipping around to face him. Her red hair whips past her and hits Will’s cheek, causing him to chuckle. “What did he do?” She looked ready to combust with anticipation, her brown eyes glinting.

“He beat the shit out of Alexander. Was hitting him in the head, and Alexander didn’t even defend himself. Just stood there and took it.” Dustin waved his hands around, making emphatic gestures as he got into his story. “Apparently they’ve been fighting over who gets to take Madison Jones out on a date next weekend, and it got physical fast.”

Lucas groaned, rolling his eyes. “Fucking hell. Do you two ladies need some tea for your hot gossip session.” He sassed, swiping a fry from Mike.

“Dude!” Mike whined, and Will smiled. “What the hell?” He protested.

“I’m hungry, and you can buy more.” Lucas replied, grinning triumphantly when El agreed with him. “Look, Wheeler, even your girlfriend agrees with me.”

Will felt rather than saw Max stiffen beside him. Her hands were clenched tightly, knuckles white from her harsh grip. Will snuck a glance at El, and noticed how her hands were moving. She was fidgeting, fingers tapping on the table and wandering and fiddling with everything. “Hey,” Max whispered to El, kicking her ankle under the table.

“Ow.” El hisses, adjusting a hair tie on her wrist.

Max ignores her. “Hey, do you wanna braid my hair? It’ll give you something to do.” Max offers, words dripping with invitation.

“Okay.” El nods, a smile quirking on her lips. When she smiles, she looks less sad. Will prefers it when El smiles.

Will stands up, trading spots with El and takes her seat beside Mike. Will presses closer to Mike, his elbow brushing against Mike’s jacket. He can feel Mike’s body heat through his clothes, and Will wants so badly to take his hand. He wants to do the cheesy walks on the beach and dinner dates and dumb coffee breaks in stupid cafés that charge too much for a small cup of coffee. Max sits on the other side of the table, humming under her breath as El plays with her hair. Max’s eyes are closed in contentment, and if she was a cat she’d be purring. She’s relaxed, in a way Will has never quite seen her. It seems El brings something inside Max to the surface, and Will suspects it’s softness. Max doesn’t bend, but for El she curves her body to soften her edges. It’s lovely, and it’s telling.

Four

Will has gone to college, graduated college, attending Mike's wedding, and seen his son. His eyes are closed, and he sleeps soundly in El's arms. He is beautiful, and Will loves him instantly. "Do you wanna hold him?" El asks, exhaustion seeping from her voice.

Will nods, hardly able to speak. He's washed in awe, and adoration for this child. "Of course." He breathes softly, and tears glisten in his eyes. "Hey, little guy. Welcome to the family. I'm your uncle Will." He loves this little guy, and he's sure his Mom will cry the moment she first sees him.

Mike comes in, Max following behind him. Mike's got dark circles under his eyes, bruises smeared on his pale skin. Will wants to smooth his hair, and tell him to take a nap. He looks like he needs it. Max trails in awkwardly, dirty sneakers scuffing against the floor. She looks uncomfortable, and she's slumped in on herself. She's wearing jeans, dirty white sneakers, and a green hoodie.

"Hey, Will." Max greets him softly, raising a hand. She's doesn't wave it, just holds it up before letting it fall. She blushes, embarrassed.

"Hi, Max." They haven't spoken much since the phone call before the wedding. Will thinks about it sometimes, and it makes him burn. It's either in anger or embarrassment. He's never sure which one it is.

Max lets the conversation drop, and the silence hangs in the air, heavy and awkward. "So, where's the rest of the Party?" Max asks eventually.

Mike and El exchange a significant look. Will swallows nervously, careful to make sure he didn't tighten his grip on the baby. "They

aren't coming." El finally says, linking her fingers with Mike's.

"What?" Max's face tightens with confusion. "Why?" She asks, chewing on her lower lip.

"We sorta didn't invite them over." Mike rubs the back of his neck sheepishly, a blush crawling onto his pale cheeks. It's adorable.

Max raises an eyebrow, a flash of annoyance sparking in her eyes briefly before it disappears. "I repeat, why?"

Mike and El exchange a look again, and Will feels a jolt of anger. The surprise drowns it out, and Will hopes the anger will shamefully drown. They smile, happiness dancing in their eyes. Will hopes this won't take too long because it's getting hard to breathe in their perfect home. It hurts to stand in their *perfect* home with their *perfect* son and *perfect* relationship and *perfect* lives. Will kind of hates himself.

"We wanted to ask you something important." El shares, eyes alight with joy. "Something concerning Henry."

Will freezes, panic sending icy shivers down his spine. Max's eyes are wide, like a deer caught in headlights. "What about him?" He asks carefully, fear carefully disguised as curiosity. Max fiddles with her hair, dread plain in her eyes. Maybe Will is the only one who can see it because he feels it too.

“We want you to be Henry’s Godparents.” Mike tells them in a rush, a grin breaking across his face.

Will hopes Mike can’t hear his heart shattering. Max looks absolutely crushed, but then she smiles brightly. “El, of course. You didn’t even need to ask.” Max laughs, hurt clear in her eyes. Will’s stomach clenches, and he nods emphatically.

“Yeah, you guys. Of course we’ll be Henry’s Godparents. We love him just as much as we love you.” Will chimes in, pushing his heartache away. Now is not the time.

“Maybe more.” Max jokes, winding her arms around El.

Will laughs, and it sounds false even to him. “Definitely more.” Everybody laughs, and love hangs heavy in the air. It’s not a good thing.

They leave, and Will goes home to an empty apartment. He curls in bed and cries, shoulders shaking and snot running down his nose. Love fucking sucks. He only gets out of bed when he hears a knock. He opens the door to see Max, eyes red and puffy.

“Will. I’m sorry.” She whispers, tears pooling in her eyes. Will opens his arms, and she falls into them. They cry together in the door of his apartment, and nothing is okay. “I love her.” She sobs, and Will begins to cry harder.

“I know.” He blubbers against her hair. He can smell the strawberry scent from her shampoo. “I know.” Will hugs Max tighter.

Nothing is okay.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading!! I know I haven't updated in a while and I'm sorry about that. Life gets busy, and I genuinely didn't know how long it had been since I'd updated it. Hope you enjoyed!

4. El

Summary for the Chapter:

El is oblivious, but she isn't all at the same time.

One

Let it be known that El hates Romeo and Juliet. It's stupid, honestly. It's not like they're some great epic romance. Juliet was only thirteen for fuck's sake (Dustin's been rubbing off on her for some reason) and Romeo was too impulsive, and indecisive. One second he loved Rosaline and the next it was Juliet. It was bullshit, to put it frankly.

What El hated the most was that their English teacher Mr. Julian cast them in the play. Max was the only one without a part because she was out sick that day, and she always said it was a relief because of how often El bitched about. El would always laugh, and smack her arm.

El was cast as Juliet which she really fucking hated. She had a *reputation* to uphold. One kid had even said it was the most he'd heard her speak for the entire year she'd been publicly there at Hawkins. El didn't hate it as much as she would like to, though, because Mike had been chosen for Romeo. They hadn't gotten very far in the play. They were only a few scenes in, and of course Mike had to be gone the day they read through *the* most iconic scene from Romeo and Juliet.

Mr. Julian had chosen Max to act as Romeo for the day, explaining that it'd be better for her participation considering she didn't have a role. Max had groaned loudly, leaning in to mutter angrily in El's ear about what bullshit it was. They were reading Act Two Scene Two,

and El was not excited. She felt a little guilty because maybe she'd be excited if it was Mike reading, but Max looks as annoyed as El feels so she supposes she's fine.

Mr. Julian had reorganized the desks, and he had set up a set of sorts for El and Max. Max was on her knees facing a cardboard balcony with a chair in front of her, the play open to the page they were supposed to start reading at. El was supposed to sit on a stool on the other side of the balcony, looking down on Max.

“Okay, ladies, whenever you're ready. But, like, a soon ready.” Mr. Julian cracked a grin, green eyes glittering. He was most people's favorite teacher. He was charming and funny and effortlessly cool in a way most of the Freshman aspired to be.

Max rolled her eyes, heaving a sigh that was heavier than El's entire body. “ *He jests at scars that never felt a wound.* ” Max read, boredom dripping from her voice. El would believe she was entirely done with the whole thing except she could read Max better than anybody else could. Max's voice was trembling just the slightest, and her boredom was over the top, as if she was putting on a show. Max opened her mouth to read the next words, and then faltered. Visibly faltered, and El felt like she was seeing something she wasn't supposed to. Vulnerability, her mind provided. She had looked it up last week, actually. It was the only way to describe Max in that moment. Vulnerable.

Max pushed on, pushing her flaming hair behind her ear. They had english in the afternoon, and Mr. Julian preferred to keep the blinds up to avoid blocking out the sun. It just so happened to give Max's red hair the appearance that it was on fire. El loved it.

“ But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?” Max spoke slowly and softly, her eyes narrowed in concentration. She glanced up at El briefly, eyes widening before she quickly ducked her head again. *“ It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.”* Max stuttered, pink lips parting as she took a deep breath. She looked back up at El, and there was something El couldn’t decipher in her eyes. Max took a breath, pink flushing across her cheeks and highlighting the many freckles on her face. *“Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, Who is already sick and pale with grief, That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she. Be not her maid since she is envious. Her vestal livery is but sick and green, And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off! It is my lady. Oh, it is my love. Oh, that she knew she were!”* The words poured from Max’s lips as if it were air and Max was desperate to drown. She had memorized the passage, and she had no need for the book. El wondered why she had memorized it.

Max paused, the stream of words ceasing for a moment. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from Eleven, and something murky like turmoil lurked in her pretty blue eyes. *“She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that? Her eye discourses. I will answer it- I am too bold. ‘Tis not to me she speaks. Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, Having some business, do entreat her eyes To twinkle in their spheres till they return. What if her eyes were there, they in her head? The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars As daylight doth a lamp. Her eye in heaven Would through the airy region stream so bright That birds would sing and think it were not night.”* Max stops, swallowing roughly. Her fingers stretch carefully, and there is something sad in her eyes and her face. Her words turn soft and slow, as if she’s savoring every word that leaves her mouth. *“ See how she leans her cheek upon her hand. Oh, that I were a glove upon that hand That I might touch that cheek!”* Max’s voice was barely a whisper, and she looked embarrassed.

El opened her mouth to start her line, and made a resolution to ask Max about it after class.

The class flew by, and Max swung her bag over her shoulder and gestured for El to hurry up. "I'm coming." El's tongue tripped over the words, and she just wanted to take a nap. Reading Romeo and Juliet exhausted her because she had so many complicated lines. It was terrible, and her tongue always felt heavy after reading the play.

They walked in silence, shoulders bumping playfully as they walked. "So why do you have that mon-monol-" El groaned, heaving a frustrated sigh.

"Monologue." Max reminded her gently, reaching out and grasping her hand. She wasn't judging, no, Max would never judge.

"Why do you know it so well?" El asked, her curiosity overcoming her.

Max's shoulders stiffened, and she looked slightly uncomfortable. She didn't answer until they got into the loud lunchroom. "Because you're Juliet and I want to be your Romeo." Max answered softly so El wouldn't hear her. Her voice was so quiet it was swallowed up by the noisy lunchroom.

El never heard a thing.

Two

"Kid, I told you, you can't go to that party!" Hopper grunted, glaring at El, who was dressed in a red dress with matching lipstick.

“Why?” El whined, pouting and giving Hop her best doe eyes. “Mike is going.” El added in, realizing the moment after she said it that it wouldn’t persuade Hop to let her go. “And Will is, too. Joyce is letting him go. And Max is going to be there too. Please!” El begged, dropping onto the couch beside him.

Hopper gave her side-eye for a minute before releasing a sigh of relief. “Fine, kid. Be home at midnight. Promise.” He demanded.

“Thank you!” El squealed, flinging her arms around Hopper. “Promise I’ll be back at midnight!” El beamed, bouncing out the door to her car. She left Hopper smiling, and shaking his head fondly. He really did love his daughter. His weird, lovable, puppy-like, powerful daughter.

El started the car, and loud pop music filtered up from the speakers. El sang aloud, voice loud and off-key. She danced in her seat, wriggling around like a worm on a hook. She pulled onto the Hayes’s lawn, stepping out of the car and narrowly avoiding a drunken guy spilling his beer on her shoes. She twitched her neck, and the boy stumbled a few feet away just as his beer tipped over and the contents came pouring out. El swiped a hand under her nose, and wiped the blood on her matching red dress. This was why red was her favorite color. It hid the blood really well. “Mouth-breather.” El grumbled, making her way into Jennifer’s house.

Music blared, and rainbow light reflectors casted glowing lights on the walls and ceiling and various body parts if you moved into the right spot. El slithered through the mass of grinding bodies, narrowly avoiding thrashing elbows and sliding past sweaty bodies. El was looking for Mike, and didn’t notice when Max popped up beside her.

“Hey!” Max shouted cheerfully, ducking as an arm flew at her head. “El, who’re you looking for?” Max asked, catching El’s elbow and pulling her closer to Max.

El glanced at her, surprise flashing across her face. Her pink lips dropped open in a perfect ‘o’ and she smiled sweetly. “Hey, Max. I’m just trying to find Mike.” Max’s smile dropped, her entire face shifting from happy to not. El frowned curiously, glancing at the redhead. Max dropped her head for a second, and when she lifted it she was smiling again. A rainbow flickered across her face, and El thought she looked beautiful. Then El blinked, and Max moved and the moment disappeared.

“Why’re you lookin’ for Wheeler?” Max grumbled, snagging a beer from a tall blonde who giggled loudly and shouted out magic. “The party is out here.” Max waved a hand around carelessly, almost smacking a kid in the face.

“With you?” El jokes, but Max’s face twists as if she’s swallowed something rather sour. “Hey, Max-” El reached out, intending to touch Max’s arm. She hadn’t meant to upset Max. *Never* Max.

“Yeah, Jane. With me.” Max says just as the song ends. The party is still loud, girls grinding and boys kissing girls with pretty eyes and good makeup skills. Vulnerability creeps into Max’s voice, and her use of Jane leaves El feeling a little unsteady. Something warm unfurls in her stomach, heat curling low in her gut. Jane feels right when it falls from Max’s lips.

“Max.” El starts, but she falters. Her eyes are locked with Max’s, and everything clicks into place. El leans closer, brown curls sliding across her cheek. Her brown eyes are staring at Max’s blue ones,

burning with an intensity that makes El shiver. Max moves closer, hips swaying and suddenly she's so close to El that they are breathing the same air.

“*Jane.*” Max whispers, eyes dropping to her lips where they hesitate, heavy and emotional. She speaks El's name as if it's a prayer, the words hushed as they fly from her tongue. El is about to lean forward, and close the gap when a boy bumps into her. Warm liquid that's probably beer spills down her dress, and she twists around as Max leans in. Max's nose bumps awkwardly against El's cheek, and her mouth presses against El's cheek for one solitary moment before she jerks back.

“I'll help you clean up.” Max offers, stuttering as she speaks. Her cheeks burn crimson, and she looks so adorable that El can only nod. They travel to the bathroom, hands linked loosely until they get to the upstairs bathroom. El stares into the mirror as Max slowly unzips the pretty red dress. Max's fingers brush against El's spine, and shivers spark where Max's fingers drift. El watches Max, watches as she swallows roughly when she notices El's lack of a bra. Max carefully wets a cloth, wiping up the sticky mess on El's skin. Max moves quickly, and El wonders if she even saw it. Max presses a kiss to her shoulder blade, darting in and backing up so quickly that El figures she imagined it. “There.” Max says softly, refusing to meet El's eyes. “Now you can go find Mike.” Her words are chilly as if they've recently taken an ice bath.

“Okay.” El tells her, speaking to her feet because she hates when Max gets angry with her.

El is halfway out the door when Max calls after her. “Hey, El.” El hates herself for the disappointment that rushes through her bloodstream. “I hope you and Mike have a nice night.” Max smiles,

but it's so clearly fake.

El just nods, and wishes Max would call her Jane again. She finds Mike, and she kisses him hard. She curls so close to him that they'd only be closer if she opened him up and climbed into his skin. Then her bones would be his bones, and they'd be closer than ever. "I'm ready." El confides in him, and she is. She's not doing this because of Max. Not at all. Max just gave her a push in the right direction.

When they finish, Mike falls asleep easily. El would too if her thoughts weren't overrun with *MikeandMaxMikeandMaxMikeandMax*. El thinks that it won't ever end.

It never really does.

Three

"I want to be a cheerleader." El announces on a Thursday afternoon during lunch. She drops her tray with a clang, and sits down with a hesitant look.

"You what?!" Mike spits out, eyes bugging out of his eyes.

Lucas laughs, giggling to himself until he notices El's hurt eyes. "Oh, shit. You're serious?" He asks, eyes wide with surprise.

"Yes." El grumbles, turning to Max. "What do you think?"

Max blushed, knocking her shoulder against El's. "I think that I will come to every dumbass sporting event that you cheer at to support you." Max shares with her, clearing her throat and looking away.

El cheers, flinging her arms around Max's shoulders. "Oh, Max! This is the greatest thing that you've ever done as my best friend." She buries her head in Max's red hair, inhaling the scent of strawberry and Max's perfume. "Will you come to try outs with me?" El asks, pulling away from Max's warm body.

"What? El, I don't think I can." Max tried to tell the brunette, who frowned like Max had just kicked her puppy into the sun. "Do not give me those eyes, El, you know I can't resist." Max complained, her eyes shining as El gave her full attention the taller girl.

"I know. That's why I'm giving you the eyes." El grinned, a giggle bubbling up from her throat. "Please, Maxie, please!" El leaned closer, and she could practically feel Max's breath ghosting against her cheek. "I'll love you forever." El promised, eyes glinting.

"Okay, okay. Fine! I'll go to you cheer tryouts." Max gave in, blushing pink and grinning like a fool at El. She was internally melting, her insides going soft and gooey.

"Yes!" El shouted, collapsing against Max as she laughed. "I broke you! I got you to cave!" El crowed triumphantly, bony elbows pressed into Max's side. Max could've said something, but she couldn't bring herself to. El's elbows digging into Max's side felt realistic, and important. It felt like something.

“You promised you’d love me forever.” Max reminded the smaller girl, lacing their fingers together. El stops laughing, breathless all of a sudden. “And I need a forever with you.” She meets Max’s eyes seriously, and it all feels so important. It’s a movie moment, but El hasn’t watched any movies so she doesn’t understand that she’s the love interest and Max is the protagonist and they are supposed to be together. El doesn’t know any of this, so she pulls away and Max’s smile wobbles before crumbling in on itself.

Tryouts roll around, and Max accompanies a nervous El. She watches her scream her lungs out about Hawkins High pride. She does flips and cartwheels, and smiles bigger than Max has ever seen before. It all crumbles to pieces when she doesn’t make the squad. “Sorry, Hopper, but you’re a loser. Losers don’t make the cheer squad.” Jennifer Hayes explains snidely, throwing the tearful brunette a fake smile. She never has gotten over Will’s rejection of her in Freshman Year, and Max is the only one who knows it’s because of his sexuality.

“Max.” El whispers, staring blankly at the printed names on the sheet, her eyes flicking everywhere over it to see her name. She never finds it, and all the other girls have gone home by now. Hawkins High is empty and silent, the hallways eerie. “How could I *not* have made it?” El blinks, something indescribable in her eyes.

Max shifts uncomfortably, before stepping forward and taking El’s hand. “I don’t know El.” Max rubs her thumb on the back of El’s hand, a hopefully comforting sensation. “You were better than all those dipshits.” Max is painfully sincere. She’s never been able to master the art of not looking at El.

El looks over at Max. Max looks at El steadily, and they hold hands until El is ready to leave.

Four

Girls Night has always been a sacred tradition. It's the summer after Freshman Year of college, and El is exhausted. She sleeps for, like, a week and then Hop tells her to get her lazy ass out of bed. Luckily for El, it's the week Nancy and Max come home. Nancy will be there for the weekend, and Max will be there for a month before she has to head back for fancy California for an internship. El wouldn't say she was bitter about it. She would say resentful because the idiots that live in Hawkins might not know what she was saying.

"I *told* you, Mike. It's Girls Night!" El snapped, groaning and running a hand through her curly hair. "It's self explanatory."

Mike frowned at her, rolling his eyes and purposely messing up his atrociously messed up hair. He barely brushed it in the morning, adding to his disheveled history professor hoping to be published soon aesthetic. He wasn't even a teacher yet, but he wore tweed like it was nobody's fucking business. "Sorry that I want to spend time with you, El. I haven't seen you at all for ages. School has kicked my ass, you've been partying all the time, and-" Mike continued ranting about their distance while El became lost in memories.

Meggy had kissed her one day in the library. They had been buried in the stacks, quoting romance stuff to each other. Meggy had just leaned over and kissed her, winding her dark hands into El's curly hair. They had been inseparable after that. Holding hands under the library table, El kissing Meggy's neck, and admiring the contrast between their light and dark skin. It was something new, and

exciting. It was just friends, and the whole sex thing didn't even count because Meggy was a girl. It had ended when El mentioned her boyfriend. Meggy had flinched, jerking away as her eyes glowed with hurt. El didn't really understand. It wasn't like they were *together* .

Years later, El would recognize that her actions were shitty. It hadn't been fair for Meggy or Mike, and it was so incredibly wrong. El getting educated was something miraculous that she cherished. She had even reached out to Meggy to apologize. Meggy had brushed it off, sending a photo of her and her pregnant wife.

"Mike, I'm sorry." El cuts him off, grasping his clammy hand lightly. "I didn't realize I was being such a flake." El kissed him quickly, snagging her purse from behind his back and quickly escaping from the room.

"You kissed him and ditched him! Holy shit, El, you're amazing!" Max cackled from the chair beside El, who was in the middle. Max was to El's left, and Nancy was to El's right.

"He's going to be really upset, won't he?" El asked anxiously, wringing her hands nervously as she turned to Nancy.

Nancy rolled her eyes, placing a reassuring hand on El's arm. "Ellie, don't even worry about it. Mike is twat." Nancy ran a hand through her hair, examining the ends of her hair. "Do you think I should get a haircut?" Nancy asked, glancing at her two companions.

"Fuck yeah." Max agreed, chewing on her lower lip. "Should I?" Max glanced in the mirror, blue eyes staring at her reflection.

“No!” El blurted, blushing at the incredulous look Max shot her. “I mean, why?” El recovered, composing herself. She didn’t know why she had reacted so strongly. She just didn’t like the idea of Max changing her hair. It was so long, and pretty. El loved braiding it, carding her hands through the masses of red waves when Max would sleep in it.

Max sighed, tugging roughly on the ends. “I just want a change. Plus, it’s starting to look a little shitty at the ends.” Max admitted, reaching over and grabbing the remote from El’s lap. She switched off the soap much to El’s dismay. “C’mon, ladies, let’s get our hair cut.”

“I was watching that!” El protested, standing up despite her protests. “Besides, I don’t want to get my hair cut.” El hated haircuts. It brought back unpleasant memories of the lab.

“Ellie, if we are doing it, then you are doing it. It’s getting a little long, anyways.” Nancy grabbed her car keys and stood up, stretching like a cat.

Max got it cut to her shoulders, laughing about how light it was. It had previously been down to her waist, and the change was admittedly exhilarating. Nancy’s hair wasn’t particularly long, only falling to just below her shoulder blades. Her new haircut was down to her jaw, similarly to the style she had when she first got together with Jonathan. El got her hair cut down to her jaw, and it was straightened so it would appear sleek. El hated to admit that she kind of loved it. It made her look older, and more mature.

“El, you look hot. And to celebrate your new found hotness, we are

going to a bar.” Max announced with a sly grin, snaking the keys from Nancy and hopping into the older girl’s car. “Lets go, bitches.” Nancy drank beer, grinning while she shared stories of her summer road trips with Jonathan. El drank red wine, feeling classy. Max drank tequila, throwing back shot after shot. Coincidentally, she drank more after boys came by to flirt with El.

“Maybe you should slow down.” El suggested, eyebrows furrowed with concern. She waved off some guy named Drake, and frowned when Max took two shots in quick succession.

“Seriously Max, you should listen to El.” Nancy warned seriously.

“Y’know, normally I would.” Max laughed drunkenly, standing up and swaying over to El. “I usually listen to El because she’s so much better than me. Smarter, prettier, wiser. Isn’t she the prettiest?” Max slurred, grinning at El with sad eyes. “Jane, you are the prettiest girl I have ever seen. *Ever* !” Max reached out, taking El’s hand. El couldn’t quite focus on Max’s words, though. She was stuck on Jane, and her eyes were stuck on Max’s pink mouth which was still moving. El probably wouldn’t have focused on her words had a drunk guy not wandered up to them.

“Are you lesbians? ‘Cause you look like lesbians.” The guy leered, a lecherous smirk on his face. “You should kiss. It’d be hot. Like, really hot.”

“Oh, we aren’t-” *together*, El was going to say when Max kissed her. Max just reached over, grabbed her face and swiftly kissed her. Max gently put her tongue in El’s mouth, sighing against her mouth before melting bonelessly into El. El kissed her back, heart beating rapidly against her ribs. It was like kissing Meggy but it was better because it

was Max. El didn't really know why kissing Max was better, but it was.

El could've kissed Max forever, but she stopped when she felt someone tapping her shoulder. El pulled away from Max, and looked into the eyes of Nancy Wheeler, her boyfriend's sister. "I must've drank more than I thought." El said, and ignored the disappointment burning in Max's eyes.

The drive home was quiet. Nancy dropped Max off first, and then she drove El home. "She's in love with you." Nancy finally spoke up after a few minutes of awkward silence. Her face was glowing a soft orange due to streetlamps.

"What?" El mumbled, her ears burning. She couldn't stop thinking of how nice it felt when Max gripped her waist, and the way the redhead tasted like tequila and cherries.

"Max. She's in love with you." Nancy answered, sad and infinitely wise.

"What? No." El sputtered, her heart racing and something pulsing in her bones.

"Yes, El. She's hurting, and you aren't helping." Nancy looked away from her, gripping her steering wheel.

"I know." El finally acknowledges the thing she's known for years.

She's just been pretending, and it isn't okay anymore.

Her best friend is in love with her. "So what are you gonna do about it?" Nancy asks, and El gets out of the car. She watches Nancy drive away until the taillights have disappeared from view, and then she walks inside her house. Max is in love with her, and it is such a grand love that it consumes everything. El can't allow herself to feel that way, to get swept up in Max's gorgeous blue eyes so she walks upstairs to her boyfriend. To the only acceptable future that she can have.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is the end??!! Omg it's been a ride. I hope you guys have enjoyed this journey between Max and El and everybody. I hope you guys aren't disappointed, and that you guys are as happy with this story as I am. Thank you for the comments and kudos and bookmarks, and I love you all!! I'm glad you guys have been on this journey with me!!! :)